

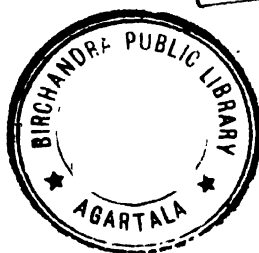
FESTIVAL NIGHT

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CESARE PAVESE

Festival Night
and other stories

TRANSLATED
AND WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
A. E. MURCH



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Land of Exile

1

When a sudden, unexpected turn of events in my job drove me down to the far south of Italy, I felt very much on my own. The squalid village seemed to me a kind of penance – such as we each have to suffer at least once in a lifetime – and also as a place where I could withdraw from the world to sort out my ideas and find fresh experiences. And a penance it certainly was, all the months I stayed there; as for my anticipation of novelty and excitement, that fancy had me properly fooled. Being a native of Piedmont, I took such a jaundiced view of things down there that their probable significance escaped me. Yet I still remember it all – the little donkeys, the pitchers on the window-sills, the many-coloured sauces, the shrieks of the ugly old hags and the beggars – so vividly, so strangely, that I am truly sorry I did not take a more sympathetic interest in them at the time. And when I reflect how intensely I longed for the skies and the streets of Piedmont – where I am living so restlessly now – I can only conclude we are made that way. Only when a thing has passed, or changed, or vanished, can we really see what it is like.

The sea was there – a remote, colourless sea. Even today, whenever I feel depressed, I hear the surge of it in the back of my mind. On its bare, low beaches, every trace of land

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ended in a vague immensity. There were days when I sat on the shingle and stared apprehensively out to sea at the heavy clouds piling up on the skyline. I could have wished the whole world was empty beyond that harsh, inhuman shore.

The beach was desolate but not unpleasant. I was glad enough – since the country around was so uninteresting – to walk along it in the morning, or towards evening, keeping to the pebble ridge so as not to tire myself in the sand. I forced myself to take an interest in the little clumps of flowering geranium and the strong, fleshy leaves of the aloes. It always distressed me to come across a sandy shpot uprooted or crushed, the green pulp of its leaves all shrivelled up, showing the network of veins.

I remember one July morning when the heat was so intense that I could not make out where the sea ended and the sky began. A few yards above the line of shingle lay a cluster of shabby, weather-beaten old boats, one of them turned on its side as if resting after the night's fishing. The waves at the water's edge showed scarcely a ripple, as though they were cowed by the vast expanse of ocean.

Sitting against a boat in the shade I saw the convict from the open prison, a working man. He was gazing at the hill on whose summit stood the rocky white walls of an old fortress – the ancient village. He seemed fascinated by the limpid light in the sky that threw a bright veil over everything. He did not turn as I went by. He was wearing a peaked cap pulled down over his eyes and a brown suit, threadbare at the elbows and baggy at the knees. After I had gone past I heard him call me. A Turin newspaper was sticking out of my pocket in plain view.

While the young fellow was reading it, I squatted down in the shade of the boat to get my breath back. There was a smell of wood baking in the sun and of burning sand.

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After a while I asked him: 'Going bathing?'

'All the papers say the same things,' he replied, fumbling in his pocket. 'Got anything to smoke?'

I gave him a cigarette and began undressing in the sunshine.

'I'm no politician,' he went on. 'What I want from the papers isn't politics. I like to read about what's happening at home. Instead of that, all they can talk about is politics.'

'I thought you might be . . .'

'I'm a communist,' he interrupted me. 'I had a fight with a soldier, but that was a personal matter. I am a communist,' and he pulled his cap down over his eyes.

I slipped into my bathing trunks and sat down in the sun. I looked towards the calm, quivering sea, savouring in anticipation the foam on my face as I swam, the cool freshness of deep water, the marbled look of the sun below the surface. I felt very conscious of that heavily clad body still lying under the boat, almost out of sight. Long sleeves, thick trousers, rough cloth cap. The man must be suffocating!

'Coming for a swim?' I asked again.

'I'd rather have river water,' he replied, lost in thought.

'There's none of that here,' I told him.

I came up the shore, dripping wet, and threw myself down on the sand with my eyes shut. When I opened them again and sat up, I glanced casually at the hillside. The sun was still beating down, giving a red glow to the drab dejection of the thick plants and the nearby houses. My clothes made a dark patch beside the boat.

'And are you a prisoner, too?' the fellow called from where he lay.

'We all are, here, more or less,' I shouted. 'The only escape is to go in the water.'

'And what relief is that, in winter time?'

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‘ In winter we dream of the place we came from.’

‘ I dream of it even in summer.’

He came over and sat down beside me on the sand. He had taken off his jacket and was wearing a dark sleeveless shirt.

‘ And the people who live here,’ he asked, ‘ what place do you think they dream about?’

‘ They think about Northern Italy even more than we do.’

‘ Yes, but this is their own land. They aren’t missing anything.’

Across the railway, between the beach and the first out-lying houses of the village, came a group of women going to their own bathing-place among the rocks further up the coast; old women, heavily built and dressed in brown, but with them was a girl in white.

For something to say, I remarked, ‘ Swimming in the Po is nicer, of course. There’s not so much sun and it’s more convenient.’

‘ Where did you live in Turin?’

I told him.

‘ What are you doing in this part of the country, then?’

‘ I’m working on the new road. I’m an engineer.’

The convict wiped his nose against the back of his hand.

‘ I was a mechanic,’ he said giving me a look. ‘ D’you get any mail from Turin?’

‘ Now and then.’

‘ I had some the other day,’ and he dug out of his pocket a postcard with a view of the station. ‘ D’you know where this is?’

I looked at the picture for a moment, smiling, then gave it back to him, feeling embarrassed as I caught sight of the message.

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‘ My girl sent it to me. The only time she writes to me is when she’s fooling around with some other man. I know her.’

I didn’t like his tone – he sounded truculent – so I lit a cigarette without answering him. I waited for him to continue, but he said no more. After a minute or two he handed me back my paper with a brusque word of thanks and walked away, stumbling through the sand.

2

Some evenings, on my way home from work, I came through the countryside bordering the coast, and, every time I did so, one thing struck me as incomprehensible. When a native of these parts has gone out into the world, how can he possibly think of this region as the one place on earth that means home to him, how can he feel proud to identify himself with it, regard it as life’s haven? I was not thinking so much of the shortage of good fields and fresh water. the deceptive whimsicality of the thick stunted bushes or the bleak coast. Those things are merely natural features, and I myself was helping to modernise the place by building a good tarred road.

The very life of the people was harsh and empty, their speech and customs boorish and uncouth, warped by race-memories from the far-distant past. At any time of day, the men emerge from their wretched hovels and casually saunter off to the barber’s as if they had nothing else to do. They never seem to take the day’s work seriously. They spend their time in the streets or sitting gossiping on their doorsteps in a dialect that, in the far-off mountains of the interior, is used only by farm-hands or colliers. Perhaps they work at night, or hidden away in their close-shut,

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stifling little houses, but out of doors, from dawn to dusk, they behave like idle tourists with nothing to do but enjoy their leisure. And not one of them will allow his wife to be seen in the streets. Old women can go out, so can the children, but wives, women in the flower of their beauty, must stay out of sight.

In this respect, certainly, it was an unfriendly place. Even the men seemed aloof, not identifying themselves with the village or their street, as if they did not belong there. They seemed to lack roots, and their persistent vivacity betrayed a physical uneasiness.

Still, as dusk fell, even the village grew sweeter under the sky. A breath of air blew in from the sea and the half-naked children played in the streets, while the old women chattered in their shrill voices. From the open doors came a stench of frying. I would sit outside a tavern facing the deserted station, watching the herd of goats that supplied the district with milk as they made their way to their stable, or just drowsing in the twilight, enjoying the solitude. Sometimes I thought uneasily that somewhere beyond the mountains behind me, life in the great world was going on as usual, and one day soon I should have to find my place in it again. Someone was waiting for me there, and this certainly gave me a tacit detachment from everything around me, so that my very boredom encouraged me to indulge in day-dreams. I lit a cigarette.

Suddenly Ciccio appeared from nowhere. 'Got anything to give me, sir?' Rubbing his hands together in anticipation, he added: 'I'm a smoker, too. Thanks. Your servant.'

Ciccio was a little man, burned brown by the sun, with crafty eyes and a thin, straggling, grey beard. He was swathed in a dingy cloak and his feet were wrapped in rags secured with strips of leather. Whatever alms he was given he spent on wine, and then kept out of sight so as not to

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make a spectacle of himself. He came from somewhere inland and he had a prison record. The people here spoke of him with pride, as they did of everything else they felt belonged to them.

Ciccio was a half-wit, and every so often a fit would take him. Then he would rush wildly through the streets shouting abuse at various phantoms that haunted him personally. His wife had reduced him to this state by comparing him adversely with some other man. So Ciccio gave up everything – work, home, dignity – and roamed these coasts for a year, seeking he knew not what. Then he was put in a hospital, but he would have none of it and came back to the places he knew. So he became the Ciccio we know – the typical beggar who prefers a cigar stub or a good drink to a plate of thick soup.

Men playing cards in the tavern would drive him away, finding him a nuisance, but when they were idle and bored, or when there was a stranger about, Ciccio was worth his weight in gold – the perfect example of local eccentricity.

When he first started begging, he had been put in prison several times further up the coast, and this gave him such a horror of being shut up that even in winter he slept under bridges. ‘Otherwise what should I have to put up with?’ he once asked me all of a sudden, and I have often thought of his words. Perhaps he had been overcome by pangs of remorse that now gave a purpose to his life?

Though Ciccio was a half-wit, he was not stupid all the time. A breakdown such as his, suffering that turned his brain, could well have brought on his stroke, real or assumed, and robbed him of the right to complain. But in that case, deprived even of the comfort of railing against injustice, Ciccio would indeed have been wretched. At that time I preferred to believe he meant nothing by what he said – as begging too often makes a man do.

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If people made vulgar or impertinent references to his misfortunes, Ciccio would reply with a jumbled explanation that changed the subject. When the blonde came from town, brought down in secret and accommodated for a couple of days in the slaughterhouse, the butcher himself remarked to Ciccio: 'Look, Ciccio, you ought to murder that wife of yours. She's a whore now, you know, like this one.' But Ciccio, with a crafty look, said: 'If a woman goes wrong, the pleasure is hers and the sin is the man's – as far as we still know how to amuse ourselves'

3

At night, I used to make myself sleepy by sitting on the shore, listening to the wash of the sea in the darkness. Sometimes I stayed in the tavern studying the plans of the workings or glancing through my newspapers again, smoking and dreaming idly of the transfer that would have to come soon.

One evening, feeling restless, I turned away from the beach and was walking towards the country when I heard a voice call me. I swung round and managed to make out the workman from Turin, sitting on a bit of old wall. I was astounded, for I knew his rules forbade him to be out of doors at that hour. 'How are you, Otino?' I said.

He gave me a cigarette and we started strolling along the road flanked by olive trees. In the air was the pungent smell of September fields under a cold sky. The convict did not speak. We walked about fifty yards and back again, passing and re-passing the huts where he lived.

'This is a good way of staying at home and enjoying the fresh air at the same time,' I remarked at last.

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The other remained silent. As far as I could see, his lips were tightly pressed together. He stared at the ground he walked upon.

‘Is there much of your sentence still to run?’

Even this question brought no reply, but with a kind of effort, as though his throat was cut, he said without looking at me: ‘I’m at my wits end about someone.’

I halted, took him by the arm. ‘What the devil’s happening?’

He broke away from me and stood still. ‘I’m not telling you,’ he muttered irritably, then went on: ‘Women are rotten. Here I stay, living like a monk, and she just knocks around.’

‘The one who sent the postcard? If you write to her . . .’

The mechanic gave me a look of hatred. ‘She was my wife.’

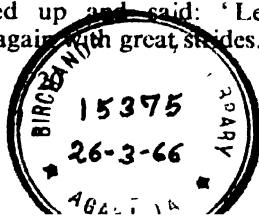
I stared back at him, aghast.

‘When I was put inside she came to see me every day, crying and wanting to come with me. But how could she earn a living down here? There isn’t a factory in the place. Then I understood and wrote telling her to come, but she didn’t answer my letter. At this very minute she’s in bed with some man or other.’

‘But aren’t you . . .’

‘We were always together . . .’ He cleared his throat and I stared at the ground. ‘Yes, of course,’ I murmured vaguely.

We leaned on the wall where the mechanic had been sitting when I saw him first. The black fretwork of the olive trees made another wall around us. The man beside me took a shuddering breath as if he had broken a rib. Then he suddenly straightened up and said: ‘Let’s go on walking.’ We started off again with great strides.



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'But,' I began, after a while, 'the fact that she didn't write to you still doesn't mean that . . .'

'Rubbish!' he cut me short. 'Not her. She's a bad lot. Even when I was there I never knew how to take her from one day to the next. She never let me know what was in the back of her mind. Not that she bossed me about, but she kept on and on. The only time I had any peace was when I saw her crying. For two years I kept her, and then she . . .' His words seemed torn from him against his will, and his clenched jaws made his face look even more gaunt.

'Why don't you write to her, Otino? Turin girls are kind-hearted. She'll willingly write back.'

'Not her. Six months ago I wrote, telling her to come at once. I've sent her three letters. You saw her reply.'

In his little furnished cell he went on talking. He explained to me that he was sent to prison because he tried to punch some sense into the head of a soldier who was having an affair with that wife of his. They gave him five years and he hadn't yet finished the first. He felt like battering his head against the wall.

'Why don't you petition for a reprieve?' I asked cautiously.

'A petition? I'll do that,' he replied, staring like a madman at the candle. 'Yes, that's what I'll do. I must . . . At this rate I'll get twenty years,' he added drily. 'If I come back.'

I looked at him uneasily. There was a worm-eaten table piled with crumpled newspapers, a filthy plate, and the lighted candle stuck in a bottle. Its light was dimmed by the stench from the bed, mingled with sweat and smoke.

He paced up and down while I watched him, seated on a stool. I knew the sort of man he was, surly and taciturn, and I couldn't think of anything else to say to him. At last

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I ventured to ask: 'And you can't do without that girl any longer?'

'I? Do without her?' he cried. 'I've done without her for a year.'

He leaned against the wall. 'I can still do without her. But for her to do without me . . . I don't want that. Now you know . . . I'm speaking to you as a friend, even if we aren't. If you've got a girl, get her in pod. It's the only way to keep her.'

'Calm down!'

4

All through the dull day, in that dull countryside the thought of him remained with me – the obsession of that prisoner tramping up and down his room or the beach, seeking in vain for peace, always alone, staring in front of him. He seldom let himself be seen – I remembered his suffering – but to see him wave to me from a distance, or to hear his name mentioned, was enough to make me aware, with an unaccustomed sense of shock, that I was not alone in that desolate region, and that someone was suffering there as I could have suffered myself. That exile's fury of resentment wounded me, filled me with a sense of remorse, and robbed me of any further interest in the life I was leading. Henceforth I longed to get away from it as from a desert island. Yet, as the probable date of my transfer grew nearer, I resigned myself more and more, with a sour complacency, to the depressing atmosphere of the place.

Among the navvies working on my road were some who had travelled the world without making any money – they squandered it if they did. I used to find them at dawn, their pockets empty, waiting on the doorstep of the hut we had

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erected at the head of the bridge over the valley, already finished. I would smoke a cigarette with them in the chill air, as we stood drawing in damp mouthfuls with our backs to the low horizon of the sea. The navvies chattered away among themselves: 'At New Orleans I used to stay in bed in the mornings with a woman. There wasn't much work and life was easy. A curse on the season that drove me back to work like this.'

'Luck is luck. If you work you are swindled.'

'You ought to ask Vincenzo Catalano about that. He used to clean the keels of the steamers, and slept on the ground with the blacks.'

'No need to be such a fool as that. It's the country people that swindle you.'

'As long as you're with a crowd you're all right.'

'If you can get to Northern Italy, that's good enough.'

'As long as you're not a fool, anywhere's good enough.'

'There was an avenue of palm trees along the seashore, and once I walked along it from dawn to dusk without coming to the end of it. At night I was back in the city again, and it was behind that café that I met . . .'

Now that the bridge was finished it was my job to act as watchman. All I had to do was to keep an eye on the three or four men who fired the boiler and planted pickets. Near the boiler was a scorched agave bush. The vapour from the tar combined with the brackish mist from the beach to veil the pale sun and sting one's eyes as it rose.

At such times I wandered away from the sea and up through the deserted street, looking up at those unknown mountains with half-shut eyes. In the street I sometimes met a peasant on his donkey, smaller than its master. The animal trotted placidly past me without glancing in my direction, while the peasant doffed his cap. He came from below those heights, a silent man from some thatched hovel

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or an ancient fortified hamlet, and scrutinised me for an instant with listless eyes. For such people the sea was a vague azure cloud. Sometimes a humble country-woman dressed in brown, sunburned and wrinkled, passed by bare-foot, with a large basket on her head or a piglet tied by a rope, scrambling along on its three free legs. She never glanced in my direction, but always kept her eyes steadily fixed on the road ahead. I never had enough of these chance encounters. This was an unknown race, living its own life on its own land.

I returned to the hut and found the navvies sitting waiting for me, some difficulty having arisen that it was not their job to settle. So came mid-day, then the evening, then the morrow, and with October the heavy rains began.

It was impossible to lay asphalt any longer. The rain was like a waterfall. I wrote to the firm to pay me off and let me go; meanwhile I spent my days shut up indoors, in the tavern.

One day the butcher took me on one side. 'Engineer,' he said, 'put up ten *lire* and join a few of us. I'm writing on Sunday. The goods will arrive on Wednesday, and by Friday, any time you have a fancy for it you can knock three times on the door and find love waiting for you.'

The blonde slipped out of the train one wet and windy night, the butcher covered her with an umbrella, another man took her case, and they all disappeared in the dark alley behind the church.

The whole village knew about it, but at the tavern it was mentioned only between a few trusted friends. 'Keep it dark,' urged the butcher, 'and we might get hold of another client or two for Concetta.' They fed her on meat and olives, but they kept her shut up. As one man left her, the next went in. I was there the second evening. As I went through the dark shop I caught sight of two disembowelled

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kids hanging from hooks over a tub. Then the butcher came across to me, opened another worm-eaten door, took me by the hand and led me in.

5

I often heard them discussing Concetta in the tavern. One man called her stupid, another suggested sending her away at once. The fact is that in the city, these girls are overworked. 'Next time we must get someone less tired.' They were particularly struck by the contrast between her dark, greasy skin and the exotic fineness of her fair hair. 'That comes from mixed breeding,' the barber explained. 'She was brought up at the foundling hospital. They're the best sort. When I was in Algeria, I went with an Arab woman as white as milk, with red hair. She said she was a sailor's daughter.'

I swore to myself that I'd had all I could take. Those discussions after love-making didn't please me much, either. There's something degrading about listening to men from another part of the world talking about women. To change the subject, I enquired. 'Has anybody seen the convict lately?'

'Sh!' hissed a young fellow, lowering his face to ours. 'Quiet! Not a word! Yesterday, someone from police headquarters came to question him. It was something about a murder.'

'That gang of twisters!'

'Who was killed?'

'Nobody. They didn't take him away. They only wanted to question him. It was about a crime that happened in North Italy.'

'What do you know about it?'

Festival Night

'Nothing. I only know I saw him last night wandering on the beach like a man out of his mind. He had no cap and it was pouring with rain.'

I ran to look for him. He was not in his hut. I enquired of the neighbours. He had gone out at dawn, as usual. I went back along the beach and came across Ciccio under an upturned boat, binding up his feet. Ciccio had seen him. 'I'll show you where he is. Don't rush me.' We searched the whole village, No-one showed the slightest curiosity. Then we turned our backs on the sea and climbed the hillside. At midnight we came to a gateway in the fort, overlooking the roofs far below. At the foot of a column sat Otino, staring at the ground. He lifted a face ravaged by grief and pain and saluted me with a vague gesture.

'What's happened, Otino?'

'What was bound to happen.'

Ciccio, who had run to the other column and sat down, gestured to me that he wanted a smoke. I told him to go to hell.

'I know that someone from police headquarters ...' I began.

'Everybody gets to know everything,' said Otino gloomily. Then he glanced round and noticed Ciccio.

'He's a fool. Anyway, he's not listening,' I said. 'If you want to tell me anything, go ahead.'

'Is he the one whose wife ran away? He must be a fool to let that bring him to such a state.'

'Otino, I've been looking for you for half an hour. They told me you were ill.'

'I?' He sprang to his feet. 'There's only one thing wrong with me, that sticks in my throat,' the words came slowly, one by one, from his pale lips. 'It's that now I can't do it myself.'

'Do what?' I murmured.

Land of Exile

'But you know that,' he shouted in my face. 'You know it all. Why pretend you don't?'

'Otino,' I said, 'when I tell you a thing, you can believe me. I know that someone from the police came to question you, but what he told you, or what information he wanted, I have no idea.'

'Give me a smoke,' he said abruptly. I passed him a cigarette, then glanced at Ciccio and threw him one, which he caught in mid-air.

'Listen, then. My wife,' – and he tried to smile – 'my wife's been murdered by one of her workmates. She's lived with him for the past six months, but they'd been lovers for two years. Yours truly was questioned because "he used to frequent the victim – frequent! – and might be able to throw some light on important precedents"'. Then, clutching me by the arm, he exclaimed: 'D'you know the best bit? He bashed her seven times, all in the face.'

He was no longer trying to smile. He spoke with a brittle lightness as though every word was forced from him, without raising his voice. When he had finished he sat there swinging his cap and staring at the cigarette, still unlit between his fingers. Then he started to his feet, crushed the cigarette in his fist and hurled it from him with a roar as if he could have thrown his hand as well. I felt the shock of it in my own arm, which he still gripped. Freeing myself, I said gently: 'Excuse me, Otino.'

'What sticks in my throat is that now I can't do it myself.' He gave another groan. 'Two years!' He took his cap in both hands. 'Two years!'

I turned away from that portico overlooking the sea, feeling callous and degraded. The two men who stayed there were not the sort to be good company. Yet I saw them a few days later in the square, sitting on a log. They were not talking, but anyway they were together.

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I spent my last days wandering about, even in the rain. I avoided looking at the sea; it was dirty, turbulent, fearful. The village and the fields seemed suddenly smaller. It took me only a few steps to reach any part of the region and I returned unsatisfied. I could not endure it any longer. There was no colour left in the place. When the weather was bad, even the mountains disappeared – the background and the horizon of my earlier walks. The only thing still visible through the rain from the tavern window was the bare hill with the dirty-white fortress on its summit – the ancient village. This was the view that stayed in my mind's eye when, in the dazzling light of early morning, I moved on to follow my own destiny.

Wedding Trip

Now that I, shattered and full of remorse, have learned how foolish it is to reject reality for the sake of idle fancies, how presumptuous to receive when one has nothing to give in return, now - Cilia is dead. Though I am resigned to my present life of drudgery and ignominy, I sometimes think how gladly I would adapt myself to her ways, if only those days could return. But perhaps that is just another of my fancies. I treated Cilia badly when I was young, when nothing should have made me irritable; no doubt I should have gone on ill-treating her, out of bitterness and the disquiet of an unhappy conscience. For instance, I am still not sure after all these years, whether I really loved her. Certainly I mourn for her; I find her in the background of my inmost thoughts; never a day passes in which I do not shrink painfully away from my memories of those two years, and I despise myself because I let her die. I grieve for her youth, even more for my own loneliness, but - and this is what really counts - did I truly love her? Not, at any rate, with the sincere, steady love a man should have for his wife.

The fact is, I owed her too much, and all I gave her in return was a blind suspicion of her motives. As it happens, I am by nature superficial and did not probe more deeply

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into such dark waters. At the time I was content to treat the matter with my instinctive diffidence and refused to give weight or substance to certain sordid thoughts that, had they taken root in my mind, would have sickened me of the whole affair. However, several times I did ask myself: 'And why did Cilia marry me?' I do not know whether it was due to a sense of my own importance, or to profound ineptitude, but the fact remains that it puzzled me.

There was no doubt that Cilia married me, not I her. Oh! Those depressing evenings I endured in her company – wandering restlessly through the streets, squeezing her arm, pretending to be free and easy, suggesting as a joke that we should jump in the river together. Such ideas didn't bother me – I was used to them – but they upset her, made her anxious to help me; so much so that she offered me, out of her wages as a shop-assistant, a little money to live on while I looked for a better job. I did not want money. I told her that to be with her in the evenings was enough for me, as long as she didn't go away and take a job somewhere else. So we drifted along. I began to tell myself, sentimentally, that what I needed was someone nice to live with; I spent too much time roaming the streets; a loving wife would know how to contrive a little home for me, and just by going into it I should be happy again, no matter how weary and miserable the day had made me.

I tried to tell myself that even alone I managed to muddle along quite well, but I knew this was no argument. 'Two people together can help each other,' said Cilia, 'and take care of one another. If they're a little in love, George, that's enough.' I was tired and disheartened, those evenings; Cilia was a dear and very much in earnest, with the fine coat she had made herself and her little broken handbag. Why not give her the joy she wanted? What other girl would suit me better? She knew what it was to work hard and be short of

Wedding Trip

money; she was an orphan, of working-class parents; I was sure that she was more eager and sincere than I.

On impulse I told her that if she would accept me, uncouth and lazy as I was, I would marry her. I felt content, soothed by the warmth of my good deed and proud to discover I had that much courage. I said to Cilia: 'I'll teach you French!' She responded with a smile in her gentle eyes as she clung tightly to my arm.

2

In those days I thought I was sincere, and once again I explained to Cilia how poor I was. I warned her that I hardly ever had a full day's work and didn't know what it was to get a pay-packet. The college where I taught French paid me by the hour. One day I told her that if she wanted to get on in the world she ought to look for some other man. Cilia looked troubled and offered to keep on with her job. 'You know very well that isn't what I want,' I muttered. Having settled things thus, we married.

It made no particular difference to my life. Already, in the past, Cilia had sometimes spent evenings with me in my room. Lovemaking was no novelty. We took two furnished rooms; the bedroom had a wide, sunny window, and there we placed the little table with my books.

Cilia, though, became a different woman. I, for my part, had been afraid that, once married, she would grow vulgar and slovenly – as I imagined her mother had been – but instead I found her more particular, more considerate towards me. She was always clean and neat, and kept everything in perfect order. Even the simple meals she prepared for me in the kitchen had the cordiality and solace of those

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hands and that smile. Her smile, especially, was transfigured. It was no longer the half-timid, half-teasing smile of a shop-girl on the spree, but the gentle flowering of an inner joy, utterly content and eager to please, a serene light on her thin young face. I felt a twinge of jealousy at this sign of a happiness I did not always share. 'She's married me and she's enjoying it,' I thought.

Only when I woke up in the morning was my heart at peace. I would turn my head against hers in our warm bed and lie close beside her as she slept (or was pretending to), my breath ruffling her hair. Then Cilia, with a drowsy smile, would put her arms around me. How different from the days when I woke alone, cold and disheartened, to stare at the first gleam of dawn!

Cilia loved me. Once she was out of bed, she found fresh joys in everything she did as she moved around our room, dressing herself, opening the windows, stealing a cautious glance at me. If I settled myself at the little table, she walked quietly so as not to disturb me; if I went out, her eyes followed me to the door; when I came home she sprang up quickly to greet me.

There were days when I did not want to go home at all. It irritated me to think I should inevitably find her there, waiting for me, even though she learned to pretend she took no special interest; I should sit beside her, tell her more or less the same things, or probably nothing at all. We should look at one another with distaste and a smile. It would be the same tomorrow and the next day, and always. Such thoughts entrapped me whenever the day was foggy and the sun looked grey. If, on the other hand, there was a lovely day when the air was clear and the sun blazed down on my head, or a perfume in the wind enfolded and enraptured me, I would linger in the streets, wishing that I still lived alone, free to stroll around till midnight and get a

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meal of some sort at the pub on the corner of the street. I had always been a lonely man, and it seemed to me to count for a great deal that I was not unfaithful to Cilia.

She, waiting for me at home, began to take in sewing, to earn a little. A neighbour gave her work, a certain Amalia, a woman of thirty or so, who once invited us to dinner. She lived alone in the room below ours, and gradually fell into the habit of bringing the work upstairs to Cilia so that they could pass the afternoon together. Her face was disfigured by a frightful scar – when she was a little girl she had pulled a boiling saucepan down on her head. Her two sorrowful, timid eyes, full of longing, flinched away when anyone looked at her, as if their humility could excuse the distortion of her features. She was a good girl. I remarked to Cilia that Amalia seemed to me like her elder sister. One day, for a joke, I said: ‘If I should run away and leave you, one fine day, would you go and live with her?’ ‘She’s had such bad luck all her life. I wouldn’t mind if you wanted to make love to her!’ Cilia teased me. Amalia called me ‘Sir’ and was shy in my presence. Cilia thought this was madly funny. I found it rather flattering.

3

It was a bad thing for me that I regarded my scanty intellectual attainments as a substitute for a regular trade. It lay at the root of so many of my wrong ideas and evil actions. But my education could have proved a good means of communion with Cilia, if only I had been more consistent. Cilia was very quick, anxious to learn everything I knew myself because, loving me so much, she could not bear to feel unworthy of me. She wanted to understand my every thought. And – who knows? – if I could have

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given her this simple pleasure I might have learned, in the quiet intimacy of our joint occupation, what a fine person she really was, how real and beautiful our life together, and perhaps Cilia would still be alive at my side, with her lovely smile that in two years I froze from her lips.

I started off enthusiastically, as I always do. Cilia's education consisted of a few back numbers of serial novels, the news in the daily papers, and a hard, precocious experience of life itself. What was I to teach her? She very much wanted to learn French and indeed, Heaven knows how, she managed to piece together scraps of it by searching through my dictionaries when she was left alone at home. But I aspired to something better than that and wanted to teach her to read properly, to appreciate the finest books. I kept a few of them – my treasures – on the little table. I tried to explain to her the finer points of novels and poems, and Cilia did her best to follow me. No-one excels me in recognising the beauty, the 'rightness' of a thought or a story, and explaining it in glowing terms. I put a great deal of effort into making her feel the freshness of ancient pages, the truth of sentiments expressed long before she and I were born, how varied, how glorious, life had been for so many many men at so many different periods. Cilia would listen with close attention, asking questions that I often found embarrassing. Sometimes as we strolled in the streets or sat eating our supper in silence, she would tell me in her candid voice of certain doubts she had, and once when I replied without conviction or with impatience – I don't remember which – she burst out laughing.

I remember that my first present to her, as her husband, was a book, *The Daughter of the Sea*. I gave it to her a month after our wedding, when we started reading lessons. Until then I had not bought her anything – nothing for the house, no new clothes – because we were too poor. Cilia

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was delighted and made a new cover for the book, but she never read it.

Now and then, when we had managed to save enough, we went to a cinema, and there Cilia really enjoyed herself. An additional attraction, for her, was that she could snuggle up close to me, and now and then ask me for explanations that she could understand. She never let Amalia come to the cinema with us, though one day the poor girl asked if she could. She explained to me that we got to know each other best of all in a cinema, and in that blessed darkness we had to be alone together.

Amalia came to our place more and more often. This, and my well-deserved disappointments, soon made me first neglect our reading lessons, and finally stop them altogether. Then, if I was in a good mood, I amused myself by joking with the two girls, and Amalia lost a little of her shyness. One evening, as I came home very late from the college with my nerves on edge, she came and stared me full in the face, with a gleam of reproof and suspicion in her timid glance. I felt more disgusted than ever by the frightful scar on her face, and spitefully I tried to make out what her features had been before they were destroyed. I remarked to Cilia, when we were alone, that Amalia, as a child must have been very like her.

‘Poor thing,’ said Cilia. ‘She spends every penny she earns trying to get cured. She hopes that then she’ll find a husband.’

‘But don’t all women know how to get a husband?’

‘I’ve already found mine,’ Cilia smiled.

‘Suppose what happened to Amalia had happened to you?’ I sneered.

Cilia came close to me. ‘Wouldn’t you want me any more?’

‘No.’

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‘But what’s upset you this evening? Don’t you like Amalia to come up here? She gives me work and helps me’

What had got into me – and I couldn’t get rid of it – was the thought that Cilia was just another Amalia. I felt disgusted and furious with both of them. My eyes were hard as I stared at Cilia, and the tender look she gave me only made me pity her, irritating me still more. On my way home I had met a husband with two dirty brats clinging round his neck, and behind him a thin worn-out little woman, his wife. I imagined what Cilia would look like when she was old and ugly, and the thought clutched me by the throat.

Outside, the stars were shining. Cilia looked at me in silence. ‘I’m going for a walk,’ I told her with a bitter smile, and I went out.

4

I had no friends and I realised, now and then, that Cilia was my whole life. As I walked the streets I thought about us and felt troubled that I did not earn enough to repay her by keeping her in comfort, so that I needn’t feel ashamed when I went home. I never wasted a penny – I did not even smoke – and, proud of that, I considered my thoughts were at least my own. But what could I make of those thoughts? On my way home I looked at people and wondered how so many of them had managed to succeed in life. Desperately I longed for changes, for something fresh and exciting.

I used to hang around the railway station, thrilled by the smoke and the bustle. For me, good fortune has always meant adventure in far-away places – a liner crossing the

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ocean, arrival at some exotic port, the clang of metal, shrill, foreign voices – I dreamed of it all the time. One evening I stopped short, terrified by the sudden realisation that if I didn't hurry up and travel somewhere with Cilia while she was still young and in love with me, I should never go at all. A fading wife and a squalling child would, for ever, prevent me. 'If only we really had money,' I thought again. 'You can do anything with money.'

'Good fortune must be deserved,' I told myself. 'Shoulder every load that life may bring. I am married but I do not want a child. Is that why I'm so wretched? Should I be luckier if I had a son?'

To live always wrapped up in oneself is a depressing thing, because a brain that is habitually secretive does not hesitate to follow incredibly stupid trains of thought that mortify the man who thinks them. This was the only origin of the doubts that plagued me.

Sometimes my longing for far-away places filled my mind even in bed. If, on a still and windless night, I suddenly caught the wild sound of a train whistle in the distance, I would start up from Cilia's side with all my dreams re-awakened.

One afternoon, when I was passing the station without even stopping, a face I knew suddenly appeared in front of me and gave a cry of greeting. Malagigi: I hadn't seen him for ten years. We shook hands and stood there exchanging courtesies. He was no longer the ugly, spiteful ink-spotted little devil I knew at school, always playing jokes in the lavatory, but I recognised that grin of his at once. 'Malagigi! Still alive, then?'

'Alive, and a qualified accountant.' His voice had changed. It was a man speaking to me now.

'Are you off somewhere, too?' he asked. 'Guess where I'm going!' As he spoke he picked up a fine leather suit-

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case that toned perfectly with his smart new raincoat and the elegance of his tie. Gripping my wrist he went on: 'Come to the train with me. I'm going to Genoa.'

'I'm in a hurry.'

'Then I leave for China!'

'No!'

'It's true. Can't a man go to China? What have you got against China? Instead of talking like that, wish me luck! Perhaps I may stay out there.'

'But what's your job?'

'I'm going to China. Come and see me off.'

'No, I really can't spare the time.'

'Then come and have coffee with me, to say goodbye. You're the last man I shall talk to, here.'

We had coffee there in the station, at the counter, while Malagigi, full of excitement, told me in fits and starts all about himself and his prospects. He was not married. He'd fathered a baby, but luckily it died. He had left school after I did, without finishing. He thought of me once, when he had to take an exam a second time. He'd gained his education in the battle of life. Now all the big firms had offered him a job. And he spoke four languages. And they were sending him to China.

I said again that I was in a hurry, (though it was not true), and managed to get away from him, feeling crushed and overwhelmed. I reached home still upset by the chance meeting, my thoughts in a turmoil. How could he rise from such a drab boyhood to the audacious height of a future like that? Not that I envied Malagigi, or even liked him; but to see, unexpectedly superimposed on his grey background, which had been mine, too, his present colourful and assured existence, such as I could glimpse only in dreams, was torment to me.

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Our room was empty, because now Cilia often went downstairs to work in our neighbour's room. I stayed there a while, brooding in the soft darkness lit only by the little blue glow of the gas-jet under the saucepan bubbling gently on the stove.

5

I passed many evenings thus, alone in the room, waiting for Cilia, pacing up and down or lying on the bed, absorbed in that silent emptiness as the dusk slowly deepened into dark. Subdued or distant noises – the shouts of children, the bustle of the street, the cries of birds – reached me only faintly. Cilia soon realised that I didn't want to be bothered with her when I came home, and she would put her head out of Amalia's room, still sewing, to hear me pass and call to me. I didn't care whether she heard me or not, but if she did I would say something or other. Once I asked Amalia, quite seriously, why she didn't come up to our room any more, where there was plenty of light. Amalia said nothing; Cilia looked away and her face grew red.

One night, for something to say, I told her about Malagigi and made her laugh gaily at that funny little man. Then I added: 'Fancy him making a fortune and going to China! I wish it had been me!'

'I should like it, too,' Cilia sighed, 'if we went to China.'

I gave a wry grin. 'In a photograph, perhaps, if we sent one to Malagigi.'

'Why not one for ourselves?' she said. 'Oh, George, we haven't ever had a photograph of us together.'

'No money.'

'Do let's have a photograph.'

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'But we oughtn't to afford it. We're together day and night, and anyway I don't like photographs.'

'We are married and we have no record of it. Let's have just one!'

I did not reply.

'It wouldn't cost much. I'll pay for it.'

'Get it done with Amalia.'

Next morning Cilia lay with her face to the wall, her hair over her eyes. She would not take any notice of me, or even look at me. I caressed her a little, then realised she was resisting me, so I jumped out of bed in a rage. Cilia got up, too, washed her face and gave me some coffee, her manner quiet and cautious, her eyes downcast. I went away without speaking to her.

An hour later I came back again. 'How much is there in the savings book?' I shouted. Cilia looked at me in surprise. She was sitting on the stool, unhappy and bewildered.

'I don't know. You've got it. About 300 *lire*, I think.'

Nearly three hundred and sixteen. Here it is,' I flung the roll of notes on the table. 'Spend it as you like. Let's have a high old time! It's all yours.'

Cilia stood up and came over to face me. 'Why have you done this, George?'

'Because I'm a fool. Listen! I'd rather not talk about it. When money is in your pocket it doesn't count any more. D'you still want that photograph?'

'But, George, I want you to be happy.'

'I am happy.'

'I do love you so much.'

'I love you, too.' I took her by the arm, sat down, and pulled her on my knee. 'Put your head here, on my shoulder.' My voice was indulgent and intimate. Cilia said nothing and leaned her cheek against mine. 'When shall we go?' I asked.

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'It doesn't matter,' she whispered.

'Then listen!' I held the back of her neck and smiled at her. Cilia, still trembling, threw her arms around my shoulders and tried to kiss me.

'Darling!' I said. 'Let's make plans. We have three hundred *lire*. Let's drop everything and go on a little trip. Quickly! Now! If we think it over we'll change our minds. Don't tell anyone about it, not even Amalia. We'll only be away a day. It will be the honeymoon we didn't have.'

'George, why wouldn't you take me away then? You said it was a silly idea, then.'

'Yes, but this isn't a honeymoon. You see, now we know each other. We're good friends. Nobody knows we're going. And, besides, we need a holiday. Don't you?'

'Of course, George. I'm so happy. Where shall we go?'

'I don't know, but we'll go at once. Would you like us to go to the sea? To Genoa?'

6

Once we were on the train, I showed a certain preoccupation. As we started, Cilia was almost beside herself with delight, held my hand and tried to make me talk. Then, finding me moody and unresponsive, she quickly understood and settled down quietly, looking out of the window with a happy smile. I remained silent, staring into nothingness, listening to the rhythmic throb of the wheels on the rails as it vibrated through my whole body. There were other people in the carriage, but I scarcely noticed them. Fields and hills were flashing past. Cilia, sitting opposite and leaning on the window-pane, seemed to be listening to something, too, but now and then she glanced swiftly in

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my direction and tried to smile. So she spied on me, at a distance.

When we arrived it was dark, and at last we found somewhere to stay, in a large, silent hotel, hidden among the trees of a deserted avenue, after going up and down an eternity of tortuous streets, making enquiries. It was a grey, cold night, that made me want to stride along with my nose in the air. Instead, Cilia, tired to death, was dragging on my arm and I was only too glad to find somewhere to sit down. We had wandered through so many brightly-lit streets, so many dark alleys that brought our hearts into our mouths, but we had never reached the sea. No-one took any notice of us. We looked like any couple out for a stroll, except for our tendency to step off the pavements, and Cilia's anxious glances at the houses and passers-by.

That hotel would do for us: nothing elegant about it. A bony young fellow with his sleeves rolled up was eating at a white table. We were received by a tall, fierce-looking woman wearing a coral necklace. I was glad to sit down. Walking with Cilia never left me free to absorb myself in what I saw, or in myself. Pre-occupied and ill-at-ease, I nevertheless had to keep her beside me and answer her, at least with gestures. Now, all I wanted – and how I wanted it – was to look around and get to know in my heart of hearts this unknown city. That was precisely why I had come.

We waited downstairs to order supper, without even going upstairs to see our room or discussing terms. I was attracted by that young fellow with his auburn whiskers and his vague, lonely manner. On his forearm was a faded tattoo mark, and as he went away he picked up a patched blue jacket.

It was midnight when we had our supper. At our little

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table, Cilia laughed a great deal at the disdainful air of the landlady. 'She thinks we're only just married,' she faltered. Then, her weary eyes full of tenderness, she asked me: 'And are we really?' as she stroked my hand.

We enquired about places in the neighbourhood. The harbour was only a hundred yards away, at the end of the avenue. 'Let's go and see it for a minute,' said Cilia. She was fit to drop, but she wanted to take that little walk with me.

We came to the railings of a terrace and caught our breath. The night was calm but dark, and the street-lamps floundered in the cold black abyss that lay before us. I said nothing, and my heart leapt as I breathed the smell of it, wild and free. Cilia looked around her and pointed out to me a line of lights, their reflection quivering in the water. Was it a ship? A breakwater? We could hear waves splashing gently in the darkness. 'Tomorrow,' she breathed ecstatically, 'Tomorrow we'll see it all.'

As we made our way back to our hotel, Cilia clung tightly to my side. 'How tired I am! George, it's lovely! Tomorrow! I'm so happy! Are you happy, too?' and she rubbed her cheek against my shoulder.

I did not feel like that. I was walking with clenched jaws, taking deep breaths and letting the wind caress me. I felt restless, remote from Cilia, alone in the world. Halfway up the stairs I said to her: 'I don't want to go to bed yet. You go on up. I'll go for another little stroll and come back.'

7

That time, too, it was the same. How I hurt Cilia! Even now, when I think of her in bed as dawn is breaking, I am filled with a desolate remorse for the way I treated her.

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Yet I couldn't help it! I alway did everything like a fool, a man in a dream, and I did not realise the sort of man I was until the end, when even remorse was useless. Now I can glimpse the truth. I become so engrossed in solitude that it deadens all my sense of human relationships and makes me incapable of tolerating or responding to any tenderness. Cilia, for me, was not an obstacle: she simply did not exist. If I had only understood this! If I had had any idea of how much harm I was doing to myself by cutting myself off from her in this way, I should have turned to her with intense gratitude and cherished her presence as my only salvation.

But is the sight of another's suffering ever enough to open a man's eyes? Instead, it takes the sweat of agony, the bitter pain that comes as we awake, lives with us as we walk the streets, lies beside us through sleepless nights, always raw and pitiless, covering us with shame.

Dawn broke wet and cloudy. The avenue was still deserted as I wandered back to the hotel. I saw Cilia and the landlady quarrelling on the stairs, both in their night clothes. Cilia was crying. The landlady, in a dressing-gown gave a shriek as I went in. Cilia stood motionless, leaning on the handrail. Her face was white with shock, her hair and her clothes in wild disorder.

'Here he is!'

'Whatever's going on here, at this time in the morning?' I asked harshly.

The landlady, clutching her bosom, started shouting that she had been disturbed in the middle of the night because of a missing husband; there had been tears, handkerchiefs ripped to shreds, telephone calls, police enquiries. Was that the way to behave? Where did I come from?

I was so weary I could hardly stand. I gave her a listless glance of disgust. Cilia had not moved. She stood there

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breathing deeply through her open mouth, her face red and distorted. 'Cilia,' I cried, 'haven't you been to sleep?'

She still did not reply. She just stood there, motionless, making no attempt to wipe away the tears that streamed from her eyes. Her hands were clasped at her waist, tearing at her handkerchief.

'I went for a walk,' I said in a hollow voice. 'I stopped by the harbour.' The landlady seemed about to interrupt me, then shrugged her shoulders. 'Anyway, I'm alive, and dying for the want of sleep. Let me throw myself on the bed.'

I slept until two, heavily as a drunkard, then I awoke with a start. The light in the room was dim, but I could hear noises in the street. Instinctively I did not move. Cilia was there, sitting in a corner, looking at me, staring at the walls, examining her fingers, jumping up now and then. After a while I whispered cautiously: 'Cilia, are you watching me?' Swiftly she raised her eyes. The shattered look I had seen earlier now seemed engraved on her face. She moved her lips to speak, but no sound came.

'Cilia, a husband shouldn't be watched,' I said in a playful voice like a child's. 'Have you had anything to eat today?' The poor girl shook her head. I jumped out of bed and looked at the clock. 'The train goes at half past three,' I cried. 'Come on, Cilia, hurry! Let's try to look happy in front of the landlady.' She did not move, so I went over and pulled her up by her cheeks.

'Listen,' I went on. 'Is it because of last night?' Her eyes filled with tears. 'I could have lied, said I had got lost, smoothed things over. I didn't do that, because I hate lies. Cheer up! I have always liked to be alone. Still, even I,' and I felt her give a start, 'even I haven't enjoyed myself much at Genoa. Yet I'm not crying.'

The Intruder

My cell-mate rambled on and on in a mumbling voice that did not carry beyond the four walls. There was nothing to stop us quarrelling if we felt inclined, or even singing, with a certain amount of discretion. I was a young man, and every now and again would heave a painful sigh that ended in a groan, but I never heard my companion do anything but mutter away to himself. He lay on his bunk and stared at the ceiling. Sentences oozed from his twisted mouth in a quiet, inexhaustible stream. Often I imagined I was alone, and would carry my stool over by the door so that I could lean back into the corner and gaze at my empty bunk, but I noticed that Lorenzo's muffled voice followed every movement I made and even seemed to suggest the very thoughts that came into my head.

Lorenzo was an old man, tall and fat; his voice seemed crushed by his great muscles. In spite of his way of arguing with the air around him he was a taciturn fellow. If I asked him something, he invariably remained still and silent for a while, as if hesitating to speak, before making any reply. When it came it was short and sharp, spoken in an undertone.

In the mornings, of course we were both wide awake and active. We washed ourselves, then quickly cleaned everything in the cell, while all around us we could hear the

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noise of clattering tins, splashes, voices. Then we went out into the corridor where we ate and saw a bit of life. It was during the long afternoons and when dusk was falling that my sighs would begin, and Lorenzo started muttering. Yet if something out of the ordinary happened – heavy footsteps passing the door, or a guard looking at us through the peep-hole – Lorenzo never let it startle him, as it did me. He just stayed where he was, standing up or lying on his bunk, and took no notice.

If I happened to be reading some book or other from the prison library, Lorenzo, who couldn't read, would stamp to and fro with that heavy body of his until at last he slackened his belt and collapsed on his bed.

'No-one ever saw anything like it!' he started muttering. 'Reading a book as if it was a newspaper! A poor sort of company! Not so much as a walking stick! That's the governor's idea! They let you read books in prison just to suit their own purpose. A man who reads will stay quiet and treat his superiors with respect. They can do what they like with him. The written law is what makes prison strong. Disgusting to see a young fellow in here lapping up all that stuff as if he was paid for it! In prison, nobody should do anything. Just let the time go by. The right sort of man has as much as he can do to get through the day. If he has to read to keep himself company, he's like those women who want a man about the place all the time. If they haven't got one, they keep a cat.'

'If you're talking to me, Lorenzo,' I told him once, 'you ought to know there's nothing like a book to kill time. Better than playing cards.'

'That's a fine way to talk,' he went on, still not moving. 'When you play cards you always have company, and in the end somebody pays. You see who's in luck and who isn't. It's a battle of wits; there are the rules! Only

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scroungers play for the sake of winning a few *lire*, but it gives a man some satisfaction to win a drink for himself by his own skill. Do they allow cards in prison, d'you think? Of course not! It's obvious! Cards are one thing, books another.'

He might have been about fifty, and his crown of grey hair was always well slicked down on his skull, unruffled by his headstrong thoughts. When he was not talking, he chewed a fag-end like an ox chewing the cud. He never seemed to be seized by the hungry longing for tomorrow that tormented me every day at dusk. My sigh of relief that night would end my boredom, was tempered by the hopeless certainty that the next day would bring the same boredom, the same hope, the self-same longing.

When they brought me into this little cell, on that first evening, Lorenzo was stretched out on his bunk. He threw me a listless glance as the guard in charge of me stood by the wide-open door while others brought in utensils and blankets from outside. As soon as we were left alone I started talking to him with all the brash over-confidence of inexperience, and boldly asked if he were awaiting trial, but my fat companion waved me away and muttered irritably that we were neither of us in any condition to concern ourselves with questions of that sort. We should get along all right together if each of us minded his own business; if we treated one another with reserve; if, in short, we behaved like two gentlemen who happened to shelter from the rain in the same shed. No need for more, except to excuse him if he ever snored in the night.

At the time we had days of persistent rain pouring down on the prison roof and in the courtyards, saturating everything. Even the light coming through our barred window was the colour of lead. Our rough blankets were unpleasant to touch with our numbed hands; in the morning, every

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object in sight was humid and depressing; the only warmth we had was when the rations came round and we could enjoy the genial presence of a scalding mess-tin squeezed between the knees. Lorenzo, ignoring me completely, would babble away at great length to his tin, bending over it so that the steam wreathed itself round him and warming his hands on it as if it were his own fireside. The rest of the time he lay at full length on his bunk, talking to himself. In those early days, I thought his behaviour was due to the bad weather. Even I wanted nothing better than to sink into a drowsy inertia and forget the squalid walls around me.

At last the rain stopped and great gusts of wind dried everything up, bringing clear skies again. We could see a patch of sky through the squares of our barred window, and I watched the white clouds as they passed. But still Lorenzo spent most of the time staring at the ceiling, grumbling incessantly. I quickly got used to stretching my legs in the narrow space between the corridor and the cell; in the same way I finally managed to ignore that continual muttering, as long as Lorenzo talked to himself. But sometimes, as inconsistent as a drunkard, he would pick holes in whatever I was doing, or question me, or let his random thoughts come to the surface, all about prison, cunning, stupidity or the tavern. Then there was nothing I could do but say something aloud, as if talking to the walls, but I soon found it did no good. It gave me no relief; instead, it left me unsettled, straining my ears.

Towards evening I managed to forget that Lorenzo was there at all and I dropped off to sleep, distraught by my old longing for tomorrow, letting the twilight numb me like a frost. This was my only means of solitude. As for Lorenzo, it was plain from his gloomy muttering that he had no desire at all to get out. One morning as I stood by the

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window, clutching the bars and taking deep breaths of fresh air, in the chill silence I heard him cursing me.

2

'What's the matter, Lorenzo?' I asked him, turning round. Lorenzo, sitting on his bunk, raised his head from a pair of shoes that he was lacing, and stared at me.

'What's come over you, Lorenzo?'

He still made no reply, but bent his head over his work and started mumbling, the usual sign of a conversation going on in his own mind. I paced up and down the cell, my thoughts in a turmoil. Often, on such mornings, I realised in an instant of terrifying lucidity how irreparable was my own condition.

'If you don't know how to control yourself,' – the muttering grew suddenly clear – 'how will you get on in prison, or when they let you out? You're like a sick man studying his own fever. Much better read your book; but if it doesn't even teach you how to stay in prison, that means you're really crazy, and in that case the police records are all wrong. If I were you, I should put in an appeal, a fine appeal on those grounds.'

'It doesn't suit me,' I retorted. 'I shouldn't be any better off than I am here.' I paused a moment, then went on: 'Listen, Lorenzo, what made you start getting at me? I haven't done anything to you, and I wish all this silly nonsense would stop. Already we're in prison. If we keep quarrelling, it'll be purgatory.'

My huge companion rose to his feet, wiping his nose on one of his massive hands that could have hurled me to the ceiling. 'Have you been dreaming, too?' he asked doubtfully.

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'What do you mean by dreaming?'

'That's all right. You weren't dreaming. Then why were you acting like a kid?'

'I wasn't.'

'You don't know you're born, yet. And here you are in prison. You start smoking as soon as they give you a cigarette, because you need something to calm you. You can't calm yourself. Who have you got outside? Some girl who doesn't come to see you here?'

'I'm married,' I stammered.

'Then your wife can set her mind at rest. You won't get run over by a lorry in here. What did you do? Play with matches and set fire to your bed?'

'Lorenzo, you're old enough to be my father, so I let you talk. It's true that I'm in your cell. You weren't put in mine. But that's not my fault. Nor have I asked you why you are here. We are here, that's all that matters.'

Again the old man looked at me dubiously. 'Then remember that we are here, and understand what that means. Don't bite your knuckles and don't sigh. Don't run to the door whenever anyone goes by. Stretch out on your bunk and learn to be alone. Any kid going to the dentist knows more about life than you do.'

So that morning passed, too. The patrol went round, bringing our food. Lorenzo went out into the open air. I stayed behind in the cell, looking into my own mind, while the silence throbbed around me. Now and then I refused to go out so as to make a change, to do something of my own choice. But I was not at ease that day. I paced wearily up and down, imagining myself really alone; and I realised that until now this idea had really terrified me.

My wife had written to me that if I was convicted of the disgraceful charge brought against me at my trial, she would, for very shame, apply for a separation, and she

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thanked God we hadn't had any children in our three years together. This information had passed over my head like a wave over a drowning man. I turned it over in my mind, before and after, and I soon learned that any man who is sent to prison gets a letter like that: clear and ruthless, or watered down in a long, inky screed, one day it comes through that little peep-hole; you hold it in your fingers and know that they want to be rid of you. That morning I saw myself as if enclosed in glass; no longer imprisoned by walls and bars but isolated in a void, a chill void that the world knows nothing about. This was the real punishment: that the world rejects a convict. What I longed for was not so much to be free, but that the world should come into my empty void and bring it colour, give it warmth with words and gestures. Reading was not enough, my cell-mate was right; what I needed was that someone, at least, in the world should think of me, send me a message now and then; not that everything should vanish in that dreadful, unnatural nothingness.

When Lorenzo came back, he was still thinking over what I had said about his being old enough to be my father, laughing ironically and muttering to himself. I was sick of reading and settled down to listen to him.

'In prison,' he began, after a while, 'a man has no need of illusions. Only fools create illusions for themselves. The government puts us in here to punish us: it's up to us to fool the government, and go out worse than we came in. Here a man sees things as they are. If there's any bad blood in prison, who's responsible for it? The prisoners, perhaps? No, Sir. The warders, who run here and there, always busy, always carrying tales, like porters at a railway station. They never leave us alone. That's why, if I find a Christian eating his heart out in this place, I want to knock it out of him. Nobody dies in prison.'

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'They don't say so, but men do die of it.'

'It's a grand thing to do without other people,' Lorenzo went on, now absorbed in his soliloquy. 'What is this world, anyway? People say so many useless words: they're more full of tricks than a monkey. A man who can wander about as he likes is never at peace. He sees a woman and wants her; he sees a piece of land and tries to get hold of it. Along comes a policeman and asks him: "Why did you touch that woman? Why did you steal that land?" "But I needed her; I had to have it," all the fools reply. "Then come along with me, and you won't need anything any more".'

The police are right. But some of us are more cunning than any of them. 'No need to raise your voice. We weren't brought up together.' Even if the prison is full, there's always another cell. 'You have to be alone.' A clever man bursts out laughing. He's never been alone. 'I'd like to try it.' And from then on, he knows. His cell no longer frightens him, and he lets the guards run where they like. All the world seems upside down. A dead man here, a drunkard there, or a woman killing a child. 'Arrest them! Put such people underground! Run!'

Instead, a clever man does not run. In prison there's room for everyone. So many cells, and each man has his own. He has the right to stay in it alone. In here, people show what they are made of. Some go mad if they are kept alone.

3

At night-time, in the ghostly light from the tiny bulb, I listened restlessly to the breathing from the neighbouring bed. My weariness was all in my head. I never felt sleepy. I wondered whether I made the same raucous sounds as

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Lorenzo whenever I had a nap. I stayed quiet, trying to go to sleep, trying not to disturb the painful thoughts I could feel crouching in my mind, ready to leap out and destroy my rest. Cautiously, almost furtively, I tried to find oblivion. But Lorenzo's mountainous bulk turned over, his bunk creaked, he muttered something, and I opened my eyes again to stare at the dim light. The patrol came round with a rattle of padlocks. I turned over to try and shut out the sound.

In the dead of night I grew drowsy and had incoherent dreams in which everything happened a long time ago and my mind, conscious of its own disorder, found no peace in them. I saw myself as a boy again, running off into the fields; or I was talking with my wife, caressing her with silly little gestures of tenderness.

In the grey light that comes before dawn I was already wide awake and waiting for the sudden clang of the bell, anticipating its deafening vibrations when the hammer fell. Lorenzo never even sat up until we could hear the first erratic tinkling sounds made by the patrol coming round to check the bars, and he had finished dressing by the time that patrol, working from each cell to the next, had reached our own. Then the door was thrown open, the head warden came in, another guard ran to the window and lifted his hammer.

One morning I heard my cell-mate exclaim: 'I tell everybody'

'Get on with it, you,' said the chief to the guard. 'What d'you want?'

In the deafening clamour, Lorenzo came forward excitedly and mumbled something. 'What is it?' the chief shouted. The guard was already waiting for him by the door.

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My huge companion lowered his head as the clanging echoes died away into silence. His lips protruded, his face was slack and wet with tears.

‘What do you want?’

‘Nothing,’ said Lorenzo. The chief rubbed the back of his neck in uncertainty. ‘Have you any complaint?’ he asked, pausing by the door.

Lorenzo turned to me and repeated quickly: ‘Have you got a complaint?’ The chief went out and the door was locked.

Lorenzo attended apathetically to the usual things. They came round to collect the rubbish and it was his turn to sweep out the cell. Then he mended a sock and chewed his fag-end. Then we both went out into the corridor. Lorenzo sat down on one of my illustrated magazines and leaned on the courtyard wall, his head between his hands. He wouldn’t say anything and twice, when I spoke to him, he growled like a dog, so I lay down and looked at the sky, watching the flight of the pigeons.

When we were back in our cell, he planted himself on the stool, his head bent, and muttered: ‘Did you have any complaint?’

‘Lorenzo, this is no way to act,’ I told him nervously. ‘Learn how to behave in prison.’

‘If you have a complaint,’ he persisted obstinately, ‘I want to warn you. You don’t know what a complaint is. You must make it by word of mouth. Don’t write it on a form, because they keep all the papers and read them at the trial. You’ve got to keep your wits about you, in prison. They hold you here on purpose to find out all about you and drive you crazy. They make you read, they make you write, then they can take it easy and keep track of everything that happens. Haven’t you realised yet why they come round and hammer at the bars? It’s not just to inspect them.

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No one has ever broken the bars. They come and make all that noise, night and morning, in the hope of driving a prisoner off his head, making him cry out, getting him to talk. Then they tell him: "We'll see about it, we'll see. But now write it down and sign it." Then they inform the magistrate.'

Not knowing what to reply, I pulled a mouthful of bread from the fresh loaf and sat chewing it while I thought over what I had heard. 'Lorenzo,' I said. 'Did they reduce you to this state?'

Lorenzo peered at me suspiciously. 'No,' he replied softly, 'but they try it on with everybody. You've got to be cunning.'

That evening, when in the distance the persistent hammering began again, the morning's scene came back to my mind and I went over to Lorenzo's bed where he lay outstretched staring with dull eyes at the ceiling. I saw him move. 'Listen, Lorenzo,' I said brusquely, 'what did you want from the chief, anyway?'

Lorenzo closed his eyes drowsily. 'Lorenzo,' I repeated, 'Stop playing the fool. What was it about, that lie you told this morning?'

Without opening his eyes he raised his great hand and waved me away. Meanwhile, with brief pauses, the rapid hammering grew nearer. Irritated and worked up by the noise, I repeated my question and seized his wrist. With a furious wrench the giant released his arm and brought it crashing down on my chest. He jumped up and knocked me sprawling to my knees, then gripped me by my shirt and the flesh of my breast so convulsively that I felt no pain at first, only the shock of the blow. Two wild eyes glared at me, mad with rage.

'Nothing to do with you,' he roared in a voice full of hate. 'I won't talk to you, nor to any of the others. I don't

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want to set eyes on you, even at night. This bunk is mine; this cell is mine.'

As I panted and struggled, all I could think of was that we must stop fighting before the patrol came in. The hammering grew even louder and sharper till my head swam; there was a roaring in my ears; and still Lorenzo kept spitting at me from his twisted mouth, driving me before him with a rain of heavy blows from his huge fists.

Then I felt someone pull me away; I saw the guards and fell crashing to the floor. Three men sprang on Lorenzo, trying to trip him and make him fall. In the struggle, one of them trampled on my hand. In the end they all rolled on the bunk where they managed to hold him down, still spitting and roaring.

'Take him down below,' said the chief coming forward. The whole group began to move. 'You stay here,' he shouted to the man with the hammer, who raised it and gave his usual deafening blows on the bars. Then they all went away, locking the door.

A moment later, the peep-hole opened. 'Did that lunatic injure you? Hold yourself ready to make a statement.' Then it shut again.

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It amazes me that Clara, Lucetta and even Signora Ugolina (who isn't a girl any more) are always so ready to exclaim that all men are disgusting, that they despise them and never know what to do with them. It's all they talk about. I don't think I've ever slept in silk sheets, but I've never said things like that or even thought them, not even when I was young and silly. Perhaps it's not really surprising in Clara's case. It even shocks her that I go boating. Clara is made of crystal and might break. Judging by the way she talks, that crystal is filled with some precious liqueur that must not be spilled. I suppose they enjoy it together, she and that ugly cross-eyed girl she takes round with her everywhere, even to the Winter Palace when it's open.

Lucetta says, for something to say: 'Men! They're clumsy, crafty good-for-nothings. Even if they're not born that way, they get like it.' Take that cheeky airman of hers, for instance, always chewing his cigarette or cupping it in his hand. His mouth is twisted and he keeps winking. She's so crazy about him that she has to tell me all about it. He gives her a dreadful time, says awful things to her, borrows money from her, and after all that he only has to grin at her and she throws her arms round his neck! She's soft-hearted, is Lucetta. I think he's a bit of a devil and she'd

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do anything to please him. Pity she's so mad about him! Sometimes, though, I fancy she tries to lead us up the garden. It wouldn't surprise me if she thoroughly enjoys all the things she complains about, finds them an outlet for her own feelings.

I shan't forget the evening when that accountant friend of hers met us from work. (This was before any of us at the Nirvana knew she had fallen for a new boy-friend). When I set eyes on that poor chap and his spectacles I felt like bursting out laughing and going off by myself, but Lucetta made me stay. I knew by the look in her eyes she had some scheme in mind. She insisted that her serious-minded Gino should walk arm in arm with both of us, so that's how we started off. I was quiet and well-behaved, but Lucetta bounced along, digging him in the ribs with her elbow now and again, shrieking with laughter so that everybody stared at us.

'Quiet, Lucy! Keep quiet!' he urged her. With me, he pretended to be unperturbed. He was more polite than ever, to offset Lucetta's wild behaviour, and told me about his life, his likes and dislikes, his hobbies and recreations. He put me in mind of a bed-bug, trying to hide himself behind me as if I were a sheet. Lucetta pestered him unmercifully, made him raise his voice and shook him until even I could hardly keep a straight face. 'Old Bellyache!' she called him, and carried on as if she was crazy. Stammering and terrified, he cut short his flow of oratory and faltered: 'Shut up, Lucy! Be quiet!'

'So you're the sort of man who can't bear to be seen out with girls like us! We're not posh enough for you! Who d'you think you are, anyway? Go on! Run away and hide! Jump in a ditch! What d'you expect to get out of us? If you're ashamed of us, say so! We don't care!' All this in

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front of the Central! I gave him a tolerant smile, like an indulgent mamma trying not to be upset by all the fuss.

That's the sort of thing Lucetta would do. And she had the cheek to call men spiteful! But she's thoughtless and lives for the moment now gay, now sad.

She gets depressed when that cynical lover of hers tells her straight out that he has no intention of marrying her. She's not stupid – just a bit crazy. She expects too much from life. Out in the street she's free and easy and she thinks men are a joke, but it's the easiest thing in the world to catch her unawares with her eyes wide with desire. Sometimes it seems to me that she's walking about naked and doesn't know it. One day as we were leaving work a stupid lout came up and tried to pal up with us. I pulled her away and would not answer him, but a few minutes later Lucetta remarked peevishly: 'Pity there weren't two of them.'

I don't envy these city girls. I grew up running barefoot among the vineyards, then I was kept at school. My father is a simple farmer who still spreads the manure himself, but it seems to me that I know a lot more about life than they do. I don't consider men are disgusting or harmful, but then I don't run round after them like a cat. I get lots of ideas as I walk through the streets. Boys look us up and down, seeing how we are dressed but knowing no more about us than that. It's easy to overlook the fact that we really know nothing about them, either. I think it's great fun to study fashions, choose colours, learn how to walk and use one's eyes, but the point is that I know it's a game. Lucetta takes it seriously.

The one who puzzled me most is Signora Ugolina. When my aunt first took me to call on her, she embraced my aunt, then me. So far, so good. But almost as soon as we sat down she began to colour up and devour me with those dull eyes of hers. As my aunt went on talking she turned and shook

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her head at me, which annoyed me so much that I laughed in her face.

After living in her house for a while I got to know her better. By now I can read the meaning of every tiny wrinkle on her face, and notice how her colour flares up when her passion rises. She is not an old woman, but she is thin and bony: yet, watching her, I feel sure she is better-looking now than she was as a girl. Clara, who sometimes comes to supper, once whispered to me with half-shut eyes that even now our hostess is an amorous woman.

In my early days there, she was very tactful with me, making casual comments that broke me of certain provincial ways; without seeming to do so, she would advise me how to dress to make the most of myself; sometimes she would stroll round the town with me; but mostly she let me do whatever I liked and find things out for myself.

'You girls!' she sighed one day. 'It upsets me that you go out to work. This bachelor-girl life you lead doesn't suit you at all, Lidia. The moment you wake in the mornings you throw on your clothes and dash out, while I stay here feeling I'm the only woman left in the world. What do your days mean to you? Just leaves on a calendar! Don't you ever think of doing better for yourself in the future, Lidia? Take care! Some day, other girls will come along even harder than you are, and brush you aside as you do us older women, leaving you shut up at home with your memories. If you want to stay young, you must enjoy being young.'

At other times she is relaxed and gay, and then her face glows. Once I was more in her confidence and she felt she could talk without reserve, we were soon on very good terms. Except in years, she is no older than I am; in everything else—thoughts, desires, fancies—we are much the same and can talk as friends. Now and then I catch

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glimpses of a certain bitterness that surprises me, so well does she keep it hidden behind an amiable, conventional façade, and I try to find out more about it.

'Lidia,' she said to me once in an anguished voice, 'it's the most dreadful thing to reach my age and realise that everything is an illusion, a filthy horrible illusion. You can give them everything, give up everything for them, make the ultimate sacrifice, even go down on your knees. As long as we have a little grace left, a little warm blood, anything they can take from us, they put up with us; and then, when they no longer know what to do with a woman, they blame her for their humiliation, though she has suffered the same from them. If you're nice to them, if you have once given them pleasure, you ought to be able to do it all the time. Even this can happen. That's a terrible thing to have to tell you, Lidia, at my age.'

'Then leave me my illusions, Signora.'

'Ah, you're joking Lidia. You make my blood run cold at times. I know what you girls are like. You think it's enough to look men straight in the eyes like dogs, and dominate them. You don't know that the vilest, meanest, most stupid man can trap a woman, humiliate her, break her life in pieces. That's the way of Nature.'

She says things like that at table, fixing me with her eyes, changing colour, venting her spite on the food she has just put in her mouth. I feel trapped there and eat quickly, looking her up and down. That hard look in her eyes makes it difficult for me to understand her. She isn't the poor, downtrodden woman she tries so hard to appear; she rages too fiercely against what she calls her humiliations. If anything had humiliated me as much as that I could never bring myself to talk about it. Or perhaps she likes to exaggerate, so as to feel more feminine.

Still, it is true that in a city one cannot live without think-

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ing of it. I am conscious of it while I'm dressing, walking about, looking around. I can understand, now, why I felt so gay when I first came here, so eager to go out walking and look around me, happy to see the strip of sky above every street. In the country, such things don't mean anything. There's too much sky there, doing no good to anybody. But it isn't only the sky. Whether I'm up in my room or down in the street, I'm thrilled by the fresh, clear light, the sunshine and shadows, people walking up and down on the pavement. But even that isn't all. There's the surprise and delight of realising I'm a woman, independent, owing nothing to anyone, being able to look a passer-by in the eye and know I'm his equal. But more than anything else, it is a quiet tenseness, a desire ripe for harvest, a wild expectancy.

I can't help thinking of it. It's great fun and gives meaning to the bustle in the street, the colours, everything around me. In a way, I can understand Lucetta. I listen to her telling me the usual things – spiteful jokes, all about her silly fits of depression – but what I understand is something different, something given away by her eyes. In my early days a voice in the street, a smile or word of greeting from the first man I met, was enough to exalt me, fill me with a limpid, golden bliss that was all the keener for being secret. Automatically I amused myself by fancying the whole street shared my intoxication, while I eagerly absorbed a vague impression of the unknown. And then I would grow numb with astonishment, realising that the underlying cause of it all was a casual glance from a man who was probably married, anyway. So much for my flights of fancy, born of nothing more than a smile! Oh! How our blood surges through our veins!

But even in moments like this I am still myself, enjoying my own company on my walk. I can look at the stones in

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the walls or the cars flying past so as not to lose my grip on myself, because that's where the danger lies. Losing our self-control, giving ourselves away. Signora Ugolina and Lucetta are always giving themselves away, and that's the real reason for all their imaginary troubles. They reveal that they are taking something seriously when it's really only a game.

How self-assured the Signora was, the time when Nanni called for me at the house. Studying her thick knuckles as she talked, she asked him what he called me; whether he really liked boating or went just to please me; whether he always wore that white pullover; whether he lived with his parents or in lodgings; in short, she pumped him in her gushing, gracious way, quite convinced she was doing it for my sake. Nanni sat there listening to her with his usual calm, his jacket slung over his shoulders, just managing not to laugh at her. When we were outside he took my holdall and asked me bluntly: 'Does she always carry on like that, even with you?'

'We all do that sort of thing,' I explained to him. 'When I was a little girl I used to kiss the cat and talk to it just as the signora did to you. When we grow up...' (Nanni chuckled at that) 'and are old enough to fall in love, some of us understand that men want something different, and some of us don't. Still, it's a rare gift to remain childlike, as she has.'

'What a woman you are!' Nanni exclaimed.

During our last month together we saw each other every evening. He worked in the same street as I did and came to meet me after work, then we would go and have supper together. He always telephoned the signora first, to tell her I should be home late, but she always waited up for me looking anxious and worried, calling me an abandoned woman and warning me not to let him go too far. She was

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baffled by his casual manner, his steady eyes and his way of slinging his jacket over his shoulders. She imagined him capable of the most sinister designs and asked me how he looked in shorts.

But Nanni understood me, or perhaps he had always been like that. I still remember his silences, those evenings when I went up to his room, and the dim light streaked with spirals of smoke. He did everything so simply, the way I like it – as if he were a boy eating fruit – never asking if I belonged to him. Then I watched him grow restless and every time I was afraid he would say something stupid. Instead, he came out with a tentative suggestion that we should go down, move on, amuse ourselves somewhere else.

The moment we were outside he was gay again, as if he owned the street, and off we went on the best of terms. He never got tired, but I very soon did and would bend down with a smile to rub my ankle. Then Nanni would resign himself to a café.

We talked of trivial things: he told me of his craze for travelling and how he wished he had been a sailor; he asked me about my part of the country, and whether I wanted to go on working in an office. He did not like city-life and advised me to get away from the people here and go back to my own village. He couldn't understand why a woman should want a job. As I listened, it always surprised me that he expressed his thoughts so plainly and simply. With him, I seemed to see myself reflected in a mirror, hearing him calmly discussing things I would say only to myself.

When he went off to the mines (he was fed up with sitting at a desk), he was shame-faced as he told me about it, as though it were something wrong. 'But, Nanni, you're doing fine! You'll live as you like and not have to bother about keeping clean or wearing a jacket. Don't they wear high

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boots in a mine? And there aren't any women down there. I wish I could come, too.'

Nanni moved his lips to speak, but then decided to say nothing and just smiled at me. If I remembered nothing else about him, the memory of that smile would always make me close my eyes in tenderness. I was so glad he asked nothing of me, for if he had spoken I'm still afraid I should have said yes.

Like a fool, I was terribly upset to see him go, and have to go back to the office. I went to the station with him, and the smell of the coal (it was a cold morning) made me want to jump in a train and get away somewhere. I thought of the barren smoke-filled places Nanni liked so much, those chill bottomless pits he would go down, and I lifted my eyes to the airy sky as Nanni would raise his when he came to the surface again.

I was so lonely that, for days, I talked about him to Clara. She gave me a wink and asked whether women were allowed to go boating by themselves. I advised her to wear her bathing costume under her dress, and one Sunday we found ourselves on the river. Clara brought along the cross-eyed girl – who seemed to have a chip on her shoulder – and they lay at full length in the bottom of the boat, stroking their legs and undressing bit by bit. We glided to a deserted spot where the bank was fringed with trees. Clara slim and blonde, was wearing a lovely little white costume. I was rowing and the other two were quarrelling, glaring at one another, turning their backs, exchanging insults or sulking in silence. The sun was very hot and as I rowed I half-closed my eyes, thinking of the past, as if Nanni were still there, pulling at the oars, while I lay back and looked at the clouds.

Clara knows how to talk, and her own special friend was being cold to her, so she started teasing me because I was

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rowing slowly. The other girl gave a sneering laugh, so Clara stuffed a caramel in her mouth to make her shut up. There she sat, pale and bony in her bathing costume, scratching her hairy calves, sucking her caramels and grumbling all the time about the sun. It beats me how Clara, who fancies she's like fine crystal, can be on such intimate terms with so much ugliness and stupidity. If that's what they want, I suppose it's all right. It's up to them. But why show her off to me – in a bathing costume, too? And why grumble at me because she doesn't like sunshine?

I felt irritated and disheartened, and was no longer enjoying the excursion. They had destroyed my peace of mind and I felt like knocking their heads together with an oar. It depressed me to remember how often, between these same river banks, I had been so idiotically happy.

As it happened, it was the cross-eyed girl who took my mind off my troubles. A boat came along, full of happy-go-lucky fellows who yelled the usual things at us, so she slipped of her bath-robe and waved it wildly above her head. Naturally the boys decided to come closer and rowed across. One of them nearly jumped into our boat, but Clara gave her precious friend a sound box on the ears and I strained at the oars to get away from them, so the fellow fell in the water. There were shouts and laughter and in the end we got away, but only just.

Clara and her friend were no longer fit to be seen; one was furious, the other trembling, and both quarrelling as if they would never stop. At last I stopped rowing and hissed at Clara: 'If you want to make that sort of scene, do it at home. Out of doors you should behave discreetly when men are about.' And Clara just stared at me and couldn't say a word, so she gave that wretched creature a final scowl and snapped: 'We'd better go back.'

So now they're shocked at me for going boating. But I

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don't regret that outing because, whenever I think of it, I regain that sense of independence I had almost forgotten. Clara doesn't matter to me, nor does Ernestina. I'm on my own again. They are just intruders. When I got out of the boat, all my sadness fell away from me as if I had shed a heavy load. No longer did I regret the fun I had had with Nanni, or find my memories painful. Nanni had been a dear friend to me, as I had been to him; we had satisfied one another, embraced each other and then had parted. That was enough. Without realising it, we fully understood each other. Now and then we had found complete serenity, and nothing should tarnish our memory of it. Those friends of mine, and the way the days dragged so heavily, didn't matter at all. The vital thing is to take what comes and be true to yourself. There's no reason why you shouldn't go on the river again and dream of what is past, but watch your step, don't give yourself away by a look. Much better to shut your eyes.

It made me so gay and light-hearted to regain my self assurance and feel mistress of myself again that for the next few days I could hardly contain myself. Lucetta, who can recognise happiness when she sees it, said to me: 'What's got into you, Lidia? Is that rowing friend of yours coming back?' I smiled. Then I asked if she would like to go to the dance with me, but that tormentor of hers had promised to take her, so we spent the afternoon laughing and joking round the little table until they went off together, arm in arm. I joined them again after supper, at the Nirvana.

By this time, even Signora Ugolina has noticed that Nanni isn't around any more. In the evenings she watches me anxiously, as if I were ill. She sighs, turns red and chatters even more wildly than usual, trying to probe my troubles. She cannot understand how I can bear to go boating again, all by myself.

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' Ah, Lidia, I knew it would end like this! I can put myself in your shoes, just as if it had happened to me. You were so keen on him, I could see. What are you going to do now? Forget him, Lidia! Do you write to him? Oh, I know how you're suffering, Lidia. Such pain takes your breath away. We should be ashamed to let them hurt us so! What did he tell you? Did he promise you anything? Don't believe such promises, don't believe anything! Poor child! Did he take you to his room?'

I let her talk, and answer her now and then, but I do not tell her what she wants to know, nor do I mention any indignities or humiliations. In the hope of leading me on, the signora probes into the cesspool of her own past and whispers her secrets to me. Amazing that she doesn't even blush! Instead she turns pale and perspires.

Yet I could have told her things that would have surprised her. I had hardly left school when the fever of love first seized me. I really was ill then, yes, indeed. But would she understand how such beginnings could end in such peace? Sometimes even now, if I wake in the night, clutching my pillow with burning hands and too terrified to move a finger, I remember what it was like then. Again I feel uprooted, lost in misery. I see myself skipping eagerly across the field, stopping every now and then with my heart in my mouth and my nostrils flaring, terrified by what I was doing, but even more terrified at the thought of not doing it. Giusto would stroll along, whistling, and smile at me, calling me: ' Poor little kid.' He would slip his arm around my waist, feeling the wild beating of my heart. How he flattered me! Then he wandered into the glen: I followed him.

There was a chestnut plantation on the bank, (long afterwards I found a chestnut leaf pressed in one of my books), and beds of fern, lumpy and rough, with patches of moss

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here and there. Giusto would throw me down on the ground wherever he happened to be. The first few times he would laugh if I broke away because a stone was sticking in my back. One day he said he knew how fine and virile he was, and if I kept coming there it meant that I found him satisfying. Like a silly fool I hid my face against his chest and determined not to complain any more. I didn't even realise I was stronger than he was.

But though these meetings turned my life upside down, at least they cleared my mind, leaving me to go home alone and exhausted, yet sometimes even serene. I would sit by myself on the threshing floor and think over what had just happened, my cheeks aflame. I was like a bitch on heat: I tremble, now, to think of the risk I ran, but perhaps the very violence of my desire, my fears and everything, protected me. Giusto, fresh from his wife, never gave it a thought; I was sixteen.

I could tell all this, but how could I describe the state I was in at home with my family? The sleepless nights, my disgust with myself when I woke, my wild anguish when I thought of the future and dared not hope that this foolish attachment would ever come to an end? I could tell Lucetta, perhaps, if only she did not admire me quite so much.

Giusto had been married for a year to a pale, devoted little woman who, as I learned later, was already pregnant. She had enough to do in the house and the business – a drapery shop on the edge of the village. I was attracted to Giusto simply because of the thrill it gave me, that summer, to run from home to the new shop and choose a material for the first dress Mamma let me have after I left school. Under the very eyes of his wife, Giusto squeezed my hand inside the folds of a green silk muslin that made me tremble all over because it was so beautiful. And though I knew,

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even then, that he was a mere upstart from the gutter, it still disturbs me to remember how his bold eyes changed and flashed between the rolls of cloth.

His timid wife smiled at me every time I went by. She knew, I think, that her husband was already false to her, but not with whom. She would not ask him, but grieved about it alone. She often went to church. Now I know I wasn't even the first. I could understand that woman: I was not jealous of her, but in her degradation and mine I saw a kind of link between us, a joy and suffering we had in common. (She was not yet twenty.) One thing I remember well: I never envied her for being his wife, and that means that something inside me resisted what threatened to destroy me. Perhaps it was only an instinct, a faint yet steadfast voice from myself as a child, as I could be again. When I think of the danger that nearly engulfed me, and how I was saved by instinct, by some unconscious power, I really believe that everything happens to us as it will. We can do nothing about it; judgment and will-power are just words. No one can lose himself or save himself, but as we are born, so we shall always remain.

Giusto wanted to use me; instead, what happened is that in his hands I became a woman. What gave him power over me was my own desperate need to get away from the country and come to the city, to know myself better, as I had dreamed of doing at school. He found me timid and fearful; he only had to raise his hand to imagine he had seduced me. But the real truth is that any pleasure I felt from his crude intimacy and cold eyes was like looking at myself in a mirror. In fact, nobody has managed to seduce me since.

Meanwhile, drifting as I was, I put up with it. I was even rash enough to talk to him about my dreams for the future, and this made him often call me a typist. One day, feeling

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reluctant, I said to him: 'You're mad! I shan't come tomorrow!' and he tried to frighten me with an icy glare. But that summer was very hot and I couldn't keep away. Still, I no longer felt any desire for him. My natural self-assurance must have been dormant then, though later it was strong enough for me to persuade my aunt to find me work here in the city, and get my family to agree. I just bent my head and kept my suffering to myself.

Then, suddenly, I was free, without wanting or even trying to be. No more putting up with it, no more inner conflict. At first I didn't even understand it. I felt on my own again, breathless and a little tired, but at peace, serene and clear as water – clearer than the sky had been all that summer. It happened one day as I was walking through our vineyard on my way to the path by the chestnut trees; it was already late in the afternoon and a big translucent moon was rising over the plantation. I had nothing special on my mind that evening, or any feeling against Giusto. On the contrary, I was convinced that he was serious about me and his roughness was due to his fear of losing me. I had left home in a hurry, thinking it was perhaps rather late. As I walked between the rows of vines I was thinking of our meeting and feeling surprised at myself. My steps faltered; I stumbled over the clods of earth, annoyed with myself for going; and all at once I knew I was free. I paused, held myself straighter, asking myself what Giusto meant to me. I smiled to myself, imagining him waiting there alone, looking so ill-tempered, crafty and uncouth, and I heard myself laugh out loud in the silence. Suddenly I felt an urge to test him, to wound him, and I took a step forward. Then I stopped and smiled once more, while the bats darted to and fro across the moon. I raised my arms as a baby does, then burst into shrieks of laughter like a silly girl and turned to go back. I was alone; that was enough for me.

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I even forgot my spiteful impulse to see how Giusto liked being jilted. I was free and on my own.

Neither that evening nor on any day that followed did I go with Giusto again. At first I stayed home, saying I was tired, and so Giusto heard that I was not well. The truth is that I was still rather afraid of him and hardly felt equal to meeting him. I could scarcely believe that the fever which had burned in my blood all that summer had really left me, but at last my tiredness went and I no longer felt reluctant to go out.

I saw him still hanging about the fields, looking for me, following me. Once he came face to face with me, scowling and humiliated, but his threats and pleading only made me lose patience. Soon his quarrels with his wife were the talk of the market-place and shocked everybody. He never had anything more from me. When his baby girl was born I decided to come to the city and I haven't heard of him since.

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1

Over the threshing floor, smooth and firm as a marble table, the evening air was rising, fresh and cool. When the setting sun has only just dropped behind the brow of a hill, the earth around the base of it seems to glow with a light of its own, a clear, serene radiance emanating from the stones and the bare soil. In the still air behind the cowshed, snatches of dance music could be heard, borne by the wind and broken by the distant hills, as if shrill voices were quarrelling far away.

Two boys with bundles of leafy branches were sweeping the threshing floor, their bare feet shuffling over its cold, hard surface. Darting sly, sidelong glances at the Padre, they seized their chance at a moment when he leaned inside a barrel and boxed each other's ears. A third boy, also barefoot, wearing long trousers, was sitting on a low wall, tying up his own bunch of leafy twigs with a strip of willow bark. Every now and then his hair fell over his face and he tossed his head to shake it out of his eyes. As the other two began squabbling he looked craftily at the Padre, who, with his cassock well tucked up, was still bending into the barrel trying to retrieve his stick, and hissed to the smaller boy: 'Soak him with that liquid manure.'

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Another barrel stood open on the threshing floor and from that one, too, came a powerful stench, its pungency softened as it rose through the cool dusk. The boy lifted his bunch of twigs to dip it in this barrel, but let it fall from his hand as the Padre straightened up, red in the face, and began wiping his fingers on his sack apron. The boy ran away, crying: 'Padre! Rico's trying to mess me up, Padre.'

The Padre glared, then turned to the lad sitting on the wall. 'You're at the bottom of the trouble! You're the rock of offence!' he shouted at him, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand and coming to a halt in the middle of the threshing floor. 'It's always you, Biscione. What are you doing, sitting there? You've already had your supper, I suppose? Your belly's swollen! We're all good at making manure, but mixing it means hard work. Get on with it! Clean this threshing floor! It will soon be dark.'

'The floor is ready,' said Biscione, without moving.

Along the path from the dung-heap came the schoolmaster with his coat over his shoulders, buckling the belt of his trousers. 'What nice fresh air there is here,' he murmured, walking close by the wall of the cowshed where the floor was not beaten so smoothly. He came and sat down on the little trough by the pump, a shallow basin filled with rubbish, and stretched out his legs, breathing through his nostrils, his eyes half shut.

'Look at all these ants! Just here!' cried the Padre, his face to the ground. 'Look out, Biscione! They're on their way to a festival, too! How they run! They seem to know the maize is coming. We shall spread it out for them.'

'Rest for a minute, Padre,' the schoolmaster broke in, filling his pipe, 'and listen to the music. It seems as if heaven itself is singing and the very wind making music tonight.'

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Biscione was sparring with the other two by the pile of branches. The Padre turned and went over to the schoolmaster, between the barrels. 'It's a fine rough wind that has brought us this music,' he said, 'and you talk of heaven! Anyone who wants to find our boys should go there and look for them among the circus tents. Sideshows and animal cages, cages and sideshows! How many came to school today?'

'Two.'

'Fine! And the parents are even worse. They eat and drink, drink and dance. They might at least listen to the music. Yesterday I was passing through the square . . . it was six o'clock in the afternoon . . . and, would you believe it? . . . I saw that woman . . . that station-mistress . . . and she's old enough to know better . . . arm in arm with her father . . . her own father, I tell you. They got into one of those dodgem cars and started going backwards and forwards, shrieking, bumping into the other cars, crashing against one another like animals. Imagine what goes on in those cars at night-time. One man, they told me, had his hand crushed between two machines.'

The schoolmaster, with a wry smile, was watching the smoke of his pipe, and beyond it, as though through a cloudy mirror, the two boys who were tying up branches. Biscione had disappeared.

'We mustn't judge, Padre. Not all unmarried people are penitents like us.'

'But you know yourself,' grumbled the Padre, digging a bit of tobacco out of his cassock and chewing it briskly - 'you hear the young people coming home all night long on the main road, staggering from one ditch to the next, so drunk they can hardly stand, spewing out all the foulness they know or don't know, kicking at our door as if it were

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a tavern. And there's no shortage of women among them, either.'

'All it means is that when the September Feast of the Madonna comes round a fine procession will sprinkle holy water on your door, too.'

'That's all very well!' snorted the Padre. 'Those circus gypsies know when they're on to a good thing and they won't leave the valley all that quickly. With all due respect, they're like this dung we're getting ready. Once you put your hands in it, you never get rid of the smell of it.' And the Padre again began rubbing his fists on the sack hanging from his neck. They were huge brown fists, streaked with black in every crease, under the nails and around the wrists. They looked like wood or shrivelled meat. Below the edge of the sack protruded his bare feet, and those, too, were knotted, covered with earth and twisted like roots.

'This smell isn't bad,' said the schoolmaster mildly. 'It shouldn't be unpleasant first thing in the morning, spread between the furrows.'

'As long as it's cow-dung, I agree,' said the Padre. 'But this lot, here, makes your eyes run. So scalding and acid it's no use even as manure.'

The schoolmaster puffed away at his pipe. 'For me, this is a sign of the good and bad aspects of our condition. In our body there is a devilish element – ill will – that poisons even what we expel. The acidity is of the spirit –' and he peered through the rank smoke at the Padre's fleshless face.

'Very likely!' the Padre answered. 'Nothing easier . . . Biscione! Are the brooms ready? Where has that rascal gone?'

As Rico and the other boy came forward, waving long bunches of alder, Biscione hastily reappeared, hitching up his trousers. The Padre went over to meet him, looked hard

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at his face and seized him by the wrist. Biscione was almost as tall as he was, but slender and not so deeply tanned.

'You went off for a smoke, eh?' said the Padre, his face close to the boy's. 'Where did you get the money?' Without replying, Biscione tried to wrench his arm free, while with the other he pretended to be fastening his trousers. 'You've been smoking,' the Padre repeated, without letting go of him. 'No nonsense! I can smell your breath. Where did you get the money?' Biscione did not answer.

'He'll collect fag-ends,' said the schoolmaster, from the pump.

'Fag-ends, indeed! I've even found fag-ends he's dropped,' snarled the Padre. 'He goes round selling baskets of peaches for me; if he doesn't do worse. Do you know you're stealing what belongs to the Lord? D'you know that?' Panting, he ransacked the boy's pockets, twisting his arm. He found nothing. 'At sixteen! These are the poor little boys we take in for charity's sake. "Idiots," the Father Superior calls them. In the ordinary way they'd sleep in ditches and come to a bad end. You're a fool, you are! So am I, and the schoolmaster. You're sure to end in a ditch, if not worse. Vagabond!' and he punched him in the face. 'Just you try and give me the slip another night, to go to San Rocco!' He hit him again. 'You don't know what you're doing!' And with a kick from his bare foot he sent him staggering three yards away. 'Get a broom and work, Biscione. That name is just right for you.'

But Biscione, who had let himself fall to the ground, jumped up and was on the point of hurling himself at the Padre. He trembled visibly, raised his arm, gripped the skin of his flank through his clothes and leaned forward. The Padre, furious, stood ready and waiting; his cassock had dropped down to his heels again, at the back. Biscione spat at him, gave a roar, turned away his head, then the

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rest of his body, started to run and disappeared behind the cowshed.

The schoolmaster had risen to his feet and was waving his pipe in one hand.

The Padre stayed a moment open-mouthed, as if on the point of crying out, then gave a shrug and turned to the others. 'Are the brooms ready? Now for the barrel! Remember, the hangman's bell-ringers don't stop working even for the Ave Maria. Come on, you others.'

The schoolmaster turned to sit down. The limpid air, clear as glass, was beginning to darken, softening and isolating the sounds that all seemed fresher, sweeter, under the bowl of the sky. Beyond the mulberry trees rustling on the nearby slope the hills stood black and distant. The bursts of music were more frequent now, more ethereal, throbbing in the tranquil air, freeing themselves in the sky from the tumult, the excitement and the wine that gave them birth – a sound as pure, as remote from humanity as the voice of the wind.

Bare feet were shuffling on the pale, hard threshing floor. The two boys were stooping in front of the barrel, ready with their alder brooms. They no longer looked at one another and seemed intent on some game. The Padre planted himself behind the barrel, his legs wide apart in their light-coloured underpants, his arms spread out to clasp the top of it. Like a wrestler he heaved at the huge cask, rocking it to start the contents moving. 'Ready!' he hissed. The two boys waited, tense and still. Then he gently tipped the cask forward, directing its mouth between them, towards the threshing floor. For a moment he balanced it there, at an angle, then slowly, cautiously, let it slant a little more, his body going with it. Panting and grunting, he braced the weight of it with his arms, his spine, the back of his legs and his heels. Away from him and between the

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two boys the dark evil-smelling slime began flowing in a rush of foam, dropping and spreading like oil. The boys leapt back. 'Get at it, you two!' roared the Padre, straining every muscle. 'Get into it! Spread it!'

The two boys bent forward, busy with their brooms. Every time one of them fell, the frothy mass splashed in all directions. Their feet made splashes, too, as they struggled frantically at their task, raising their hissing brooms, then quickly lowering them again to avoid the drips, their eyes screwed up tightly, their noses turned aside, sometimes bumping into each other, deaf to all else and working as if possessed. 'Rogues!' yelled the Padre with all his strength. 'Good-for-nothings! That's enough! Let it flow. A bit more round the side. You should be able to use up the lot . . . Get some at the side . . . Gently, now . . . Go along with it . . . Ah!' He kept on spitting and clearing his throat, still bent over the cask, still gripping it tightly as, slowly, relentlessly, it poured out the mixture.

Some semi-solid, semi-liquid splashes from the stinking flood even reached as far as the schoolmaster. He felt his head swimming as the fumes stung his eyes and nostrils, the distant music rang in his ears, and a wild impulse seized him to shed his shoes and stockings, strip off his clothes and plunge into the heaving mass, leaping and shouting, his beard flying in the wind. But he didn't bat an eyelid, except for the tears that streamed from his enflamed eyes.

The two boys had already calmed down. In response to the Padre's voice they obediently took short, careful steps and with their long brooms, now unrecognisable, they bent over and slowly swept the bubbling mass to get rid of the froth, pushing it away from them as they moved forward, glancing at each other now and then. As the last dregs drained from the steaming cask the Padre let it fall

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to the ground and collapsed on top of it in a single, shapeless heap.

'This smell, Padre, goes to a man's head like new wine,' the schoolmaster remarked from the shadows where he sat spitting.

'We're all a bit responsible for it.'

2

Rico set the big lantern down on the window-sill and peered into the storeroom. The wide patches of shadow danced as the flame flickered, the whole room quivered like an earthquake in the ruddy glow, then the dangling bunches of garlic, last year's yellowing corn-cobs, piled up sacks of grain, all grew still again and could be vaguely seen for what they were.

'Here's where you sleep.'

Barefoot, the two boys went in across the floor of beaten earth, leaving the light by the window. 'The Padre said we were to wash,' Rico breathed in a whisper. 'I'm sleepy. I'd rather stick my feet out over the edge of the mattress.'

'If the Padre catches you, you'll see what happens. Look at what he did when Biscione started playing up today,' muttered Gosto, under his breath.

'You silly ass! Biscione does it all on purpose. What happened to him? Nothing. Biscione ran off and came to bed. That way he didn't do any more work. Every time Biscione manages to get himself kicked out, we stay and do the work by ourselves. He did the same thing when the garden had to be hoed. Afterwards the Padre forgave him, but meanwhile I did the hoeing. You were in the vineyard, that time.'

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Rico shook the lantern to put it out. Its dying flare danced over the three mattresses lined up against the wall. The furthest one was torn, and on it lay Biscione, face downwards with his legs together, his chest bare, his pale arms crossed under his head. He had not moved, not even disturbed by Gosto's muttering or the rustling of the dried leaves of the mattresses. As the shadows gathered, Gosto made the gesture of throwing a stone at him, his mouth distorted in an ugly grimace.

'No!' whispered Rico, and as he spoke the storeroom was plunged into darkness. There came a deep breath or two as they stretched out, creaks and rustles from the mattresses, a grunt and a sigh. Then the outline of the wide open window came into view again, a vague shape in the shadowy gloom.

Through the window, in the chill night air, came the sound of music, now echoing in the distance, now very close at hand, clear, yet faint. It seemed to breathe with the wind, suddenly ceasing, then coming back again mixed with the noise of the grass-hoppers or drowned by a gay voice singing, who knows where. Then the voice died away in the night and the wave of sound was lost among the trees.

'Rico,' Gosto muttered, 'you stink. It makes me sick.'

'You're the one who stinks. I ran round the meadow to wash my feet in the dew.'

'That was no good, Rico. There wasn't any dew by that time.'

'The Padre will scold you tomorrow. You'll see. You're not Biscione, you know.'

'Tomorrow,' said Gosto, his voice muffled against the mattress, 'I'll ask the Padre to let me go bathing in the Piana. He said he'd let me, if I didn't run off on the sly. I know a little lake, cool as a well, where the girls go. Once I saw some of them there, wearing only their shifts. I'll tell

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him we're taking the ashes to the rubbish dump, and then we can run to the girls' bathing pool. The Padre lets us go and wash after taking the ashes, so we can stay there as long as we like.'

'How did you manage to see the girls, Gosto? We aren't allowed to.'

'There are rushes growing on the sand by the river. You can get quite close without being seen. You ask the Padre, too. Then he'll let us. You need a good wash, too.'

'Don't be stupid, Gosto. The threshing floor's finished, now. Tomorrow we'll be bringing in the maize. Workmen are coming and we'll all be off to the fields before day-break. A fine chance that he'll let us go tomorrow! We'll be carrying so many of those baskets that we'll be streaming with sweat inside our shirts. Even Biscione will have to work tomorrow.'

Gosto gave a deep sigh and turned over noisily. The storeroom was alive with tiny sounds, the creaking of wood, gnawing teeth, the flutter of wings. Biscione had not moved.

'Let's go another time, with Biscione,' Rico whispered. Then, after a silence, 'Do the girls always go there?'

'If Biscione comes, too, the Padre's sure to notice it. He was already playing up, today. He's capable of starting to talk to the girls, and then I shan't be able to go there again,' Gosto objected.

'What are the girls like? Can you see them?'

'No, because they keep their shifts on. But you can see their legs. The big ones have legs as white as butter.'

'Biscione saw one of them once with a man, when he went to tread grapes at the Rossi's place. He says they were lying together behind the bushes in the Pratone, towards evening. They were doing what dogs do. He heard the woman laughing.'

'When was that?'

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'Last year, at the feast of the Rosary.'

'That was wrong of Biscione. Why didn't he tell the Padre? Are we the only ones who have to make confession?'

'Then the man went away and the woman saw Biscione. She told him people are allowed to embrace in the grass.' Rico's shrill, breathless little voice broke in a stifled snigger.

'Ugh!' replied Gosto, stuffing his mouth against the pillow.

'Biscione gave me a cigarette, once,' Rico went on softly.

'Did you smoke it?'

'Sure.' Again a distant surge of music echoed through the trees. Rico paused until it was drowned by the shrill piping of the crickets, then he repeated, more emphatically.

'Sure. And he told me the Padre doesn't get goitre, simply because he chews tobacco. Look at the schoolmaster: he smokes a pipe and he hasn't got goitre, like you. You ought to smoke, to cure it. I'm going to smoke, so that I shan't get it.'

'But Biscione has never had it.'

'Because he smokes, that's why. He told me that the Padre won't let us smoke, because then we'll both get goitre and no-one will give us work outside the village.'

'But what about women? They don't smoke, and hardly any of them have goitre.'

'It's not the same for women. Besides, once in the main road I saw one go by in a carriage that came from Canelli, and she was smoking.'

There was silence for a moment, then Gosto said, barely forming the words: 'You'll see. He won't get away tonight as he did on Sunday. If the Padre gets to know about it, he won't let him come back in. That's why he was cheeky to the Padre today.'

'Biscione gets out when he likes and he always comes

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back,' Rico stoutly protested, 'even if you spy on him as you did on Sunday.'

'But he was going dancing.'

'Ass! D'you think they'd let him go in the dance hall, barefoot? Instead, he went to see the menagerie in the big tent. He says there are so many other things to see, but that's the best of all.'

'Really?'

'There's a woman dressed to look naked, in glittering tights. She waits by the door and calls the people in. Inside there's a lion leaping about in a cage, and the trainer who rattles a pitchfork along the bars to make him turn. He says the lion roars like thunder. Everybody goes to see him. Biscione couldn't go in because it costs ten *soldi*, but he says you can hear everything from outside, even the tamer talking to the lion and the woman when she dances. Even the straw smells fierce, quite different from ours. When the show was closing, Biscione had a chat with the lion-tamer. He says he was wearing top boots and leather arm-bands. He's a Hungarian and knows lions as if they were oxen. He went into a booth for a minute and threw four darts: every one of them hit the bulls-eye. Then, Biscione says, he laughed and talked with the girls in Hungarian, and the woman who looked naked came along in those tights to take him away, and he ran after her with his whip all the way to the caravan where they sleep.'

'Does the woman really wear only tights?' Gosto mumbled under his breath in the silence.

3

There came a louder burst of music and Biscione suddenly raised his head. In the deserted night, that drunken tumult

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was the only sound on the wind. He stayed still, his eyes wide open, and soon he could make out the vast walls, the vague shapes of implements, the sacks and the dangling bunches of vegetables. From the next mattress came Gosto's rapid breathing.

Cautiously, Biscione got up and climbed through the window. Outside, the night was clear and cold. He looked up between the star-filled trees to make sure the night was still young. He did not hear the crickets singing. He ran lightly across the courtyard to the little door of the Padre's house. As he ran, he kept one hand firmly pressed against the leg of his trousers.

At the door he looked around, bending his head and straining his ears. In the distance the noise of a crowd was caught by the wind, but the music had ceased. Nothing could be heard, not even the dripping of the pump. He could have wished for the sound of a drunkard in the street, the howl of a dog, anything: instead, the night seemed utterly empty, hostile, making Biscione's ears ring, as if waiting.

A cricket chirruped. Biscione loosened his belt and took out the bill-hook. He brandished it for a moment in the shadow of the wall. The great hooked blade was cold but the smooth horn handle, broken at the tip, was still warm from his trousers. With a laugh he drew it across his cheek and the chill of it made him shiver. Then, silently, he whipped it through the air at the full length of his arm. If the Padre had had a goitre, like Gosto, that blow would have sliced it off. Biscione remembered when he had cut a grass snake in two. What a stroke! And the two pieces went on wriggling. A snarl escaped him.

He pushed the little door. It was shut. 'Bastard! He doesn't trust anyone,' he whispered. He turned and ran to the window. This was open - wide open. Biscione leaned

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through it and listened. He could hear no sound from the darkness. The crickets were now in full chorus, but he heard nothing else. 'If the crickets don't wake him, no-one can, as long as they don't start shouting.' Out of the gloom came a faint creak – perhaps a piece of wood in the wind – and the bill-hook slipped from Biscione's hand. Before it reached the ground he caught it by a sudden convulsive effort, then he groaned. Jerking forward, he had hit his forehead on the window-sill. The whole world seemed to crash around him, the night, the stars, the blackness. He fell to his knees under the window, dazed, filled with a presentiment of evil, his breath coming quickly, his spirit cowed.

Nothing moved in the room. 'Oh Lord, grant that he hasn't heard me.' Then he stood up again, listening. He climbed over the sill.

His feet on the cold tiles, he went forward blindly, shutting his eyes to accustom them more quickly to the dark. Suddenly he stopped. Far away, a dog howled in the night. Gripping the bill-hook, he strained his eyes in the gloom. He turned back to the window. Now he could see the first tiles beneath the sill, a chair in the corner, the vague outline of a cupboard. He swung round again: now he could make out the pale shape of the bed. He held his breath and took another step forward. Light blazed out and flooded over him where he stood.

The Padre was sitting up in bed, his hair on end, one foot on the ground, glaring at him with wide-open eyes, his hand still on the light switch. His loose nightshirt was undone, showing his bony leg protruding from the thrown-back bedclothes and reaching for the tiled floor. He pointed his left hand at Biscione, who was hurriedly trying to stuff the bill-hook inside his trousers. 'Assassin! What do you want?'

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Biscione was turning his head in every direction, looking for a way to cross the room, jump through the window and escape in the darkness. But he felt the cold steel slipping down his leg and twist itself round his feet.

'You won't get away,' shouted the Padre, jumping out of bed, his white shirt flapping round him, 'you'll never get away as long as I live. Where did you want to break in?' He was on him now, hitting him. Biscione twisted round, trying to bend down. 'Stay where you are! Stay there! Every night we have more thieves. What's the matter with your feet?' Biscione tried to throw himself on the ground, clenching his teeth and bellowing. But the Padre punched him aside, then bent to pick up the tool that had fallen free. 'You rogue! Going round with bill-hooks in the middle of the night! What were you meaning to do with it here? D'you fancy you're an expert already?'

'I wasn't going to burgle anybody,' whined Biscione, clutching the table where he had ended up, very out of breath.

'It's all the same. A bill-hook's for breaking in somewhere or killing someone. There's no one for you to murder now. What did you want in here?'

They stared at each other, dazzled by the harsh light, the Padre suspicious, dishevelled, as if his shirt had been blown on him by the wind; Biscione breathless, limp as the trousers that were trailing on the ground. They stared without a word. Biscione's mouth twisted in a faint ironic sneer. The Padre even had hair growing in the hollow at the base of his throat.

The Padre's eyes flashed at that look. He shook all over as if he had ague. He turned his head this way and that, lost in thought. Then with a scowl he raised his eyes, passed the bill-hook into his left hand and with his right made the sign of a great cross, finding himself in some difficulty as

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he tried to put his hands together afterwards. Biscione stood waiting, hanging his head.

'Don't move,' said the Padre quickly. He ran to the window and looked out, then closed it. He went back to the bed to find his underpants. 'Don't move,' he repeated, threateningly. He laid the bill-hook down on the bedside table, hastily dragged his pants on anyhow and then looked around for his cassock. Swiftly he whipped it over his head, emerging with his eyes still on Biscione. The lad had not moved from the table but was now leaning on it watching the Padre's every move, still with the same faint sneer.

'There's nothing to laugh at, you fool,' said the Padre coming over to him, fully dressed. Biscione cringed aside as if to avoid a blow.

'Now kneel down.'

Instead, Biscione straightened up with his hands on the table, still staring at the Padre.

'Kneel!' roared the Padre, raising his fist. 'Down on your knees, you madman! You could have died tonight!'

Biscione let himself slip to the floor, knocking his knees on the tiles. He saw the Padre's knobbly feet, then, as he glanced upwards, his furious eyes glaring down at him.

'I repent, O Lord my God'

'I repent, O Lord my God'

'of the dreadful thought I had'

'of the dreadful thought I had'

'against my benefactor'

'against my benefactor'

'and I thank Thee for having saved me'

'and I thank Thee for having saved me'

'in Thine infinite mercy'

'in Thine infinite mercy'

'from the death of the soul.'

'from the death of the soul.'

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'Now make the sign of the Cross and repeat the act of contrition.'

Putting his hands together at his breast, Biscione bowed his head and began mumbling devoutly under his breath while the Padre stood over him with outstretched arm, repeating the prayer with him. At last, Biscione slowly raised his head and the Padre solemnly traced on his brow the sign of absolution.

'That's better,' he said with a deep sigh of relief. 'Let's hope you'll benefit from it. On Sunday I'll confess you again with the others. Understand? Then you'll make general confession and we shall see what you deserve. You are to recite five *paters*, *aves* and *glorias* each evening from now until Sunday.'

Biscione had risen and stood tapping his arms with his crossed hands, looking doubtfully at the Padre who was mopping his forehead.

'Vagabond, did you mean to break in here? Don't you know that even to think of it is a mortal sin? Let us thank the Lord for his goodness in saving me, and saving you, too. What on earth's got into you? I hardly recognise you! All because I stopped you smoking?'

Fidgeting restlessly, Biscione let him talk, his eyes growing obstinate as he stared at the covered window. Then he replied, 'On Sunday I shan't be here.'

'What?'

'I told you before, Padre. I'm going away.'

'Where do you want to go?'

'I'll find a job. Anyway, I'm not stopping here.'

'But where will you go, you vagabond? Think of what you've done, and will do! Is this how you repent, how you turn from evil? God can hear you, you wicked boy. If your Padre doesn't keep you, who d'you think will take you? D'you really want to die in a ditch? We begin harvesting

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tomorrow morning, and you with mortal sin at your throat? Put it out of your mind, Biscione. There's no need for you to run away. As far as I'm concerned you are forgiven, but God calls you to give an account of yourself and change your way of living.'

'I'm going away because here we are no better than animals.'

'Animals? How?'

'Beasts of burden. Say what you like to Rico and Gosto, in front of anybody, but don't give me that stuff about being a fool and dying of hunger. With the schoolmaster there, too. I work like the others – more than the others – because I'm no fool; but when I've finished, I've finished. I want to relax like the schoolmaster and everybody else; and to smoke if I choose, or go for a walk in the country when my day's work is done, like all workers. I'm sorry about tonight and I won't do it again, but I won't be such a fool as to go on working for someone who doesn't pay me.'

'Biscione,' cried the Padre, 'you repented and you can still think of payment? Is this how you fear God? At your age?'

'I don't want to rob you of anything,' Biscione went on, 'and if I'm young, that's not my fault. I work like anyone else, in working hours, and I've just as much right to be paid.'

'But your food, a place to sleep, what you wear, isn't all that payment enough?'

'No! It's not enough! The day-labourers you employ get their food, too. You give them rough wine as well. We get none. It doesn't cost anything to sleep. And the trousers given us out of charity are worn-out before we get them. That's happened to Rico twice, and he's so short he can cut them off at the knees. No, I'm not satisfied.'

Slowly the Padre walked over and opened the window.

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letting a soft breath of night air into the stifling heat of the room. The wavering square of light shone across the courtyard and out into the night. There came from the darkness a confused noise of horse-play and far-off shrieks of laughter.

‘Listen, Biscione. You were born in shame; you have no family, no-one. You came from the foundling hospital. It’s no good thinking of the schoolmaster. You can’t go to school, like gentlemen’s sons. You’ve got a home here, you’re learning a trade, there are good examples before your eyes. Why aren’t you happy? Why don’t you thank God? D’you think you could find work anywhere else, at your age, without our help? Shame is what you’d find, vices and temptations. You’ve shown what you’re capable of already tonight. You might threaten someone and be taken seriously, another time.’

‘The world is full of people who threaten and are still respected. When a man gets a pay-packet, temptations don’t bother him.’

‘Look here, Biscione, to your shame you’re not a fool, but even if you’d been born mad the Lord would still have loved you. For men who work in the country it is a good thing to be simple in spirit and never look further than your own cattle, thanking the Lord for that much luck . . .’

‘You’re no fool, either, Padre. There are other jobs, away from the land.’

The Padre came closer, his eyes sharp. ‘What other jobs?’

‘There’s a man from the Piena earning four *lire* a day, looking after the horses at the circus in the square. He just gives them a little chaff night and morning, and takes them to the pond. It’s already settled. I’m going to Alba with them.’

‘Behold the Devil!’ roared the Padre, starting back.

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' Circus horses, running round and round all day! Going off to Alba! Living like a gipsy! To think of it! And that's where I came from... They're always on holiday, and what are the consequences? Did they talk you into it? You're a penitent, like me. You repented. Vagabond! You dare to talk of payment? A man gets paid for working, not for going round the streets with music and dancing. Let that suffice! What other miracles did they lead you to expect?'

' You're the one for miracles, Padre. Who mentioned music and dancing?'

' Wretch! Vagabond! Don't you know they're all run-aways, delinquents? If you're already so wicked, with the life you lead here, what will you become with people like that?'

The Padre was thoroughly excited, waving his arms and raising his voice above a din that burst out at that moment beyond the trees by the roadside, an uproar of voices shouting and dogs howling. Even Fido had started barking. He was tied by a running tether to a wire near the railings, and the wire hissed as he chased up and down. Instantly the Padre ran to the window and peered out. He muttered harshly for a moment, then turned back to Biscione, solemnly shaking his head.

' This is what that sort of life leads to,' he said in a lower tone, his voice bitter. ' Is this what you're so keen to do? You've got it in you, you have indeed. But take care. Crafty men can be cheated by craftier ones. You wouldn't be the first they've worked to death and thrown penniless into the street when the festival's over.'

' It's hard to get paid anywhere. That's why I'm only asking for a half-day off. Half-pay till the grape harvest, plus board and lodging. Because I'm young. When seed-

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time comes we'll go into it again. Free on Sundays, and allowed to go out when the work is not pressing.' Biscione was looking the Padre straight in the face, his hands stuck into his belt over his bare stomach.

The Padre said quickly: 'I'll give you Sunday if you don't draw your pay and take advantage of it at seed-time. However, first we shall hear what the Father Superior says.'

'Sunday without pay is like mass without wine. And the Superior is you. I'm too young to bother about profit. It means that I confess to you on Saturday.'

The Padre pulled at his knuckles. 'Now it's time to sleep, Biscione. We'll talk to the Superior about it. Night isn't the time to go into such things and I cannot . . .'

'Night or day, what's the odds? It's enough that we've come to terms. It means I can get away. I'll come back at harvest time when you're short-handed and you've hired me by the day. To keep me out of temptation. Is that all right?'

Slowly the Padre went over to pick up the bill-hook from beside his bed, then returned to the table. 'Biscione, you filthy wretch, you deserve to have this round your head.' Holding it out to him, he went on: 'Go to bed, and put this back where it belongs.'

'Of course, Padre,' and he stuck the blade through his belt. Then he turned, looked around, and came back to the table with an air of decision. 'But this is a mass without wine, Padre.'

'What's that?'

Biscione grinned. 'Good bargains are made over a drink.' And he did not move.

'Vagabond of a vagabond!' snorted the Padre. 'At this hour! Don't you trust anyone, you of all people?' But he went to the cupboard and took out a bottle and a glass, then went back to the table and poured the dark wine.

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‘Pick it up. I’m taking mass tomorrow and it’s past midnight.’

While Biscione sipped it, there came another outburst of shouting outside the window and such a din of stones thrown at the iron fence that even Fido’s frenzied barking barely drowned it.

4

Seated at a little iron table, the schoolmaster listened to the dance music in the square as it worked up to its final thunderous climax, more vibrant and deafening than ever. The roar of the trombones drowned the shrill clarinets, the cymbals clashed in frenzy, the trumpets joined in a long-drawn-out, ear-splitting squeal. Then suddenly there was silence, except for a low-pitched vibration, as if the voice of the music, having soared to its peak, had sunk down to earth again, humming under its breath.

In the cool night air, mellowed by the fumes of wine, he watched the comings and goings of the customers. It was stifling in the large room and the noise was deafening. The thick curtain of smoke swirled as men shouted to one another, all of them streaming with sweat. Around the tables were groups of carters with their red woollen sashes; old men from the country, their hair over their eyes; flashily dressed young hooligans; all holding glasses, sucking up their drinks with wet lips, banging on the tables, yelling, surrounded by a litter of waste paper and puddles of wine. Outside it was festival night, by God!

In his seat beside the door, the schoolmaster was cooling himself by holding his hand round the little empty beer bottle, leaning against the wall with his usual saturnine smile. Steering a course between the backs of customers in

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the half-light came a rough looking barmaid, a tall, raw-boned woman with big hips. As she poured wine from bottles or flasks, her lips twisted contemptuously as if she found the wine, the festival and everything else thoroughly distasteful. Every time she straightened up her hips bounced, and the schoolmaster half-closed his eyes.

Outside the door, where a ruddy light was shed by a lamp hanging from the architrave, a brawl had started between two deep-voiced country bumpkins. They stood there, their laboured insults inaudible above the noise of trumpets, the cries and the interminable trampling of feet, panting like a pair of bullocks. Stubbornly they persisted for a while, undeterred by the uproar around them, until the barmaid went to the door and stormed at them to go somewhere else. There was a silence, except for a wild burst of trumpet music coming from who knows where, then the two yokels pushed the barmaid aside and staggered in, arm in arm, making for a table at the back of the room.

The barmaid stayed by the door for a moment, her hips only a couple of handbreadths away from the schoolmaster's cheek, stretching her neck in the ruddy light, trying to pierce the distant gloom illuminated by swinging acetylene flares. The schoolmaster leaned forwards, too, peering between her hips and the door jamb, until the maid turned to look at him with a frown, croaking 'Excuse me.'

'Let's have more air,' stammered the schoolmaster.

'There's plenty of air,' she retorted, darting away as someone called her.

As the night proceeded, the din outside grew less deafening. Only an occasional burst of music raised its head, enlivening the confusion for a moment before it died away. One by one the flares went out and the crowd thinned in the square. Here and there in the distance, along the roads to the hills, shouting broke out, wavering in the

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wind. In the big room there were fewer people, more smoke, more wine fumes and a shriller babble of voices.

The schoolmaster had lit his pipe, wedging it between his sound teeth, and with narrowed eyes was watching everything through the smoke of it. The barmaid had come to the other side of the door and was sitting looking out, one large hand resting on her jutting knees. Now and then she glanced uneasily at her ugly, worn-out shoes. Her face was set in lines of utter weariness.

There came a moment when she broke into a smile. Another woman had appeared in the doorway, clutching to her breast a dark cloak that reached the ground. She was blonde and she looked furious, upset. She hesitated on the threshold and smiled at the barmaid. 'Hullo, Adele,' she said.

Adele twisted her knees aside so that the other could pass between her and the table, to sit in the corner. 'It's over,' sighed the blonde, falling back against the wall with her eyes closed. 'I'm worn out! More tired than a horse.'

Adele gave a thin smile. 'And I'm not, I suppose?' she asked, barely moving her lips. Then she rose to go away but paused at the door, her eyes searching the space outside.

'There's no hurry, Adele. I don't even feel like a glass of milk, tonight. There's a stink everywhere tonight. What a fug, in here! How they shout! And they stink like animals. Those at least can't wash themselves.' As she stretched her legs under the table her rose-pink shoes came into view. The edge of her cloak fell open, revealing the pink tights that covered her body as far as her breasts. Glimpsed thus, with her cloak undone, she looked naked but it was a lifeless, artificial nakedness.

'Still waiting for that fellow, Adele?' she asked casually, staring into mid-air through the smoke.

Adele swung round. 'I wonder why it is that other times

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he jumps down from his cart when his day's work is barely over and doesn't get to his feet again. He sits where you're sitting now. Even when I'm dying to get to bed he keeps me here eating and laughing till daybreak. He'd even have me dancing if I listened to him.'

The blonde listened, rubbing her lower lip against her teeth, her chin in the air. She looked resentful.

'... and when San Rocco comes round I don't set eyes on him again. Off he goes in his cart, the sot, calling at every pub in the valley and sleeping under the stars. As long as the festival is on and there's a bench to be had, he doesn't come here, not even to save his life. He'll go and drink anywhere else, but here, no! I? Wait for him? Not likely! But what I'd like to know is, wine's the same everywhere, isn't it? Why doesn't he come here? It would cost him less, too.'

'No man bothers about the cost when he's out to enjoy himself,' the blonde replied slowly, 'and they don't fancy the wine they get at home. They stay away till the morning and then they're not fit to be seen, coming back with a splitting head, whining and moaning. And we're fools enough to give them coffee.'

'I haven't married him yet, so I can't order him about,' retorted Adele, 'but if he comes in here tonight he'll get coffee! I'll bash him over the head with it, the vagabond! In ditches, when he should sleep here with me!' The other barely smiled. 'Believe me,' Adele went on, 'I'm sick of it! Still, perhaps he feels bashful, and that's why he does his drinking at a distance. Once married, he'll no longer be shy.'

The blonde had loosened her cloak and was fanning her thin cheeks with the edge of it. In that dull pink sheath, with her too-red lips pursed, her light hair lifting as she blew, she looked like a picture from a calendar. In every

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group in the room, men were eyeing her, putting their heads together and passing remarks. The schoolmaster gazed in the opposite direction, still surreptitiously watching her and listening, discreetly swallowing his saliva.

‘For me, it’s San Rocco all the year round,’ sighed the blonde. ‘We’re always in ditches or bumping along the roads in a rickety wagon that lets in the rain. At least that carter of yours goes off by himself and you wait for him in peace and comfort. You don’t have to trail round after him day and night as I do, with no friends anywhere and no company but two great insolent beasts. All day long they foul themselves and eat, foul themselves and eat. They’ve got to be cleaned and they’ve got to be fed, otherwise they’d fall ill and then we shouldn’t eat, either. He never thinks of anything but those animals of his. If it rains we must go out and cover up the cage; if we have no money we’ve got to find some for them; if I had a baby they’d eat that, too . . .’

The schoolmaster didn’t even blink. ‘. . . yet I’d put up with it all if it wasn’t for the stink,’ she went on, breathlessly. ‘For six years all I’ve smelt is that stink. And everywhere we go the people stink, too. Blaring music, deafening noise, drunks, people with their mouths wide open, yelling, drinking. If it’s summer, they smell of sweat; in winter, they stink of the stable. Some nights I even smell it in bed. He brings it to me. The minute we’re shut he rushes off to fill himself with wine and rub shoulders with the crowd. He has a fine time spending the night in ditches till the smell gets into his skin and he stinks worse than the lions . . .’

Adele had jumped up and run to the door as the iron-rimmed wheels of a cart approached, and the blonde went on, turning to the schoolmaster: ‘Some nights I can’t understand how I manage to sleep with him. He’d just as soon sleep in the cage. But maybe now I stink, too. What am I in here for, anyway?’ Her eyes widened as she looked

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around. 'Wine and sweat. Nothing but drunkards. Give me that milk, Adele, I stink too, I stink.'

The schoolmaster knocked out his pipe in the hollow of his hand and mopped his forehead without answering. Adele turned from the door looking dazed, and said to the blonde: 'He's gone past!' Her breath came in a shuddering sigh.

'Who? Oh! Your carter. So you see!'

'There were four of them whipping the horse. Drunk already, and on their way to drink somewhere else.' The blonde took her hand as it lay clenched on the table and said to her calmly: 'Cheer up, Adele. The man I'm married to even left me stuck with the lions this evening, half-way through the show. I had to whip them through their turn myself. I'm furious about it. I felt as if I was beating him and getting my own back for all this filth. Who knows what state he'll be in when he comes back to me in the morning! You women in this part of the country never wash yourselves. Go on, Adele. Get me some milk.'

As Adele sullenly walked away, the schoolmaster cleared his throat and remarked, out of the blue: 'Aren't you hot in those tights?'

The blonde winked at him, opened her cloak and looked down at her breast. 'You want me to go without them?' she replied.

There was a brief silence, then the schoolmaster went on: 'I don't consider that you smell.'

'What d'you know about it?' said the blonde. When Adele came back with the beaker, she asked her sleepily: 'Has this gentleman laid his hands on you?'

Adele looked shocked. The schoolmaster's eyes widened and his mouth dropped open, showing his teeth like a horse. 'That gentleman there?' she answered. 'Why, that's the schoolmaster. He lives with the priest.'

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The blonde opened her eyes as she drank, covering her faint smile with the beaker. 'I just wanted to be sure of it,' she said gravely, when she had finished. Then she pulled her cloak around her shoulders and went on: 'If you really want to, sir, let's go where it's cooler. These tights certainly keep me very hot.'

5

The Padre turned off the light and went out into the dark courtyard. Under the trees that hid the street he heard Fido whining, then the vibration of the wire as the animal bumped its head against it. He breathed the dog's name and it shot over to him like a dusky catapult, putting its paws on his stomach and wagging its tail. 'Good Fido,' whispered the Padre. 'The devil's even got into you, tonight. Good dog. On nights like this you should stay at home.' Fido rubbed against his hand, then stretched out its neck frantically whining to be let loose. The Padre pushed down the paws and moved back. 'Good dog,' he said again. 'Keep guard and set a good example.' Fido did his best to follow the retreating shadow, straining at the leash, half strangled; then falling back, struggling to get free and giving vent to a few muffled barks.

The Padre went to the storeroom window and groped for the lantern. He set it on the ground, bent down to light it, then straightened up, holding it at arm's length, suddenly casting its beam into the room and on to the mattresses. The great shadows loomed up and a smell of hay, sewage and sweat hit him full in the face. 'So they didn't wash, the little devils.' In the wavering light the half-naked bodies appeared, yellow and foreshortened. Rico was curled up, fast asleep with his face against the pillow and one elbow

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thrust out behind. Gosto, his trousers undone, lay on his back with his face to the ceiling, his mouth open, choking now and then from his swollen, brownish goitre as if it were a breast created to suffocate him. On the end pallet, Biscione lay at full length on his side, still in his trousers, his eyelids tightly screwed up against the light. 'That one sleeps soundly – just as I do myself,' the Padre muttered. For the first time he noticed that Biscione's cheeks showed patches of soft, reddish hair. Or perhaps it was the reflection of the light.

As he stood holding up the lantern, running his eyes over the sacks, the store of corn-cobs, the blades of scythes stacked in the corner, there reached him on the still night air the faint sound of a song from some far-away farm, a gay, deep voice that hardly broke the silence and softly died away in the distance. There, at least, was someone celebrating San Rocco on his own.

Bringing his mind back to the work in hand, the Padre lowered the great lantern and made his way towards the cowshed. Its low wall, white and unbroken, ran out at an angle from the side of the main farm buildings, under the hay-loft. The Padre turned the corner of it, lifted the lantern and pushed the smooth wood of the door. In the solemn darkness everything was quiet. Two oxen were lying comfortably on the straw beyond the ladder, chewing the cud. At the sudden influx of light they twitched their ears, still staring ahead into emptiness, their great muzzles undulating in response to the steady, silent rhythm of their jaws.

The Padre set down the lantern on the low window-sill. Beyond the grating, the circle of light shone over the smooth surface of the threshing floor, darkened and clotted here and there where the newly-spread manure was still damp. At the edge of it, the mulberry trees cast a line of dark shadow.

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Pitchfork in hand, the Padre passed the ladder and slapped one of the bullocks on the back. The animal placidly turned his head, his chain jingling. The Padre prodded him with the pitchfork to make him rise. Puffing and blowing the bullock got to his knees, bumped his nose on the manger, then, with a wave of his tail, heaved himself up until his muddy great haunches were level. 'You filthy great beast,' said the Padre. 'You're covered in muck. Worse than the boys.' Planting his bare foot on the ladder, he drove the pitchfork into the sodden straw by the animal's hooves and hoisted up a large black mass of it. Controlling the handle with both hands, he walked over to the barrel at the back of the shed and shook the load into it with a sigh of relief. Then he brought back a forkful of fresh straw, threw it down and spread it under the bullock. Almost before he had finished, the animal dropped to its knees and settled down again, still chewing the cud. All this time the other bullock gazed into the void, chewing placidly.

In the suffocating heat, the Padre went over to the window, put out the lantern and stood looking out through the bars into the darkness. From the dark patches in the pasty mass on the threshing floor rose a stench not yet dispelled by the freshness of the night. Once it had soaked up the dew it could be spread on the land without a single crack, to soften and enrich the soil.

Still restless, the Padre cast a final glance at the faint outline of the bullocks, hardly distinguishable in the shadows, and went over to the big double door. Pulling away the beam that secured it, he slipped outside. He had just stepped forward to test the surface of the paste with his foot, when, by the uncertain starlight, he glimpsed a human figure coming down the sloping side of the dunghill towards the path. 'Who's there?' he exclaimed.

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After a moment's silence, the vague shadow replied: 'Nothing to worry about. It's only me.' Jumping down to the threshing floor, trampling over the soft manure before the Padre had time to shout: 'Careful! Watch how you go!' the schoolmaster came across and stood beside him.

'It doesn't matter,' he cried shuffling his feet. 'Mud, dung and dew are the elements of night.'

'It does matter,' the Padre protested. 'You're spoiling what we've prepared with your shoes. Is this a time to be wandering about? I thought you were asleep long ago.'

The schoolmaster looked all around him, breathing through his nose. He raised his face to the dark sky, breathing noisily again. He watched the dim outline of the Padre moving back towards the cowshed window. He heard him strike a match, and in the sudden gleam of it saw him going to the threshing floor, protecting the flickering flame with one hand and holding up his cassock with the other, testing the state of the surface with his bare foot.

'And you? Is it night or morning with you, Padre?' the schoolmaster enquired jauntily, his voice vibrant with good humour.

'You, it seems to me, have been making a night of it' came the grudging reply. The feeble light flickered out and darkness closed around them again, blacker than ever. 'Haven't you been to bed?' the Padre enquired, breathing heavily.

'Too much noise, with all those drunks and festivities; even the crickets were too loud; it was too hot, anyway,' the schoolmaster answered boisterously. 'By the way,' he went on, 'I hadn't noticed that the crickets have stopped and it's almost chilly now. Who'd have thought it!'

'And it's nearly dawn already,' the Padre chimed in.

'Is it possible? How quickly summer nights pass!'

'Especially at San Rocco. The work-people will say the

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same when they fall asleep in the furrows tomorrow morning.'

'As for me, I'm not sleepy, but I'm very hungry. I fancy I've discovered that night sharpens all our senses.'

'As to that, it's usual to sleep at night.'

'That's a pity, Padre.'

By now they could both make out the vague shapes of things in the darkness.

As they leaned against the rough stones of the cowshed, the low expanse of the threshing floor lay before them, shadowed on the far side by the wall of the first field, its slopes crowned by black mulberry trees. Beyond the trees, the great jutting hill revealed itself only as a space devoid of stars, a stretch of empty sky. A little eddy of wind whipped up the harsh smell of the night, and set the leaves of the mulberry trees rustling obediently.

'I'll sit here,' said the schoolmaster, 'and wait for the dawn.' He stuffed his pipe in his mouth and leaned back against the pump. 'It can't be all that long, now.'

The Padre was walking backwards and forwards over the threshing floor, intent on testing with his bare feet the persistent dampness of certain patches. 'If the morning sun gets on these puddles,' he muttered between his teeth, 'the surface will crack like glass. Damn those boys! Instead of spreading it out evenly they left lumps in it.' He licked his dirty finger and spat quickly before holding it in the air to test the breeze.

'How peaceful it is tonight,' the schoolmaster remarked through the smoke. 'Don't complain, Padre.'

'That cursed Biscione.'

'Padre, you're always up at dawn. Why have you never told me how beautiful are these hours of night? So mysterious, so tranquil. It's another world. Everything looks different, living a secret life. The strangest things

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happen at night. It's a pleasure even to breathe, to be caressed by the darkness, the smells, the silence. One feels a bigger man, for good or evil. It's good to be alone, good to have company. Even this stink is good. It's fresh and warm, it's cheerful, it's human. To think that crimes are committed at night! How stupid the world is! Anything can happen at night.'

'Didn't you know that?'

'All I remember now is what I knew as a boy. But then I was afraid of the dark.'

'Listen, schoolmaster,' said the Padre, planting himself in the middle of the threshing floor. 'It seems to me that the fresh air has gone to your head like wine. Till yesterday I thought you an abstemious man.'

The schoolmaster bent over his pipe for a moment, then laughed hoarsely. 'As a matter of fact,' he muttered, clearing his throat, 'I have been drinking wine; the wine one can drink only at night, the wine of meditation...' He glanced at the other and suddenly went on: 'I'm happy to be alive, Padre.' Looking up again and waving his pipe, he added: 'Have you ever known this happiness?'

'Not on the feast of San Rocco, of all days in the year, and if you asked my opinion, I shouldn't advise you to look for peace and quiet on this particular night. Where the devil did you find them?'

The schoolmaster spat on the ground. 'I didn't look for them. They came to me,' he said slowly, with conviction, and over his face, already flushed in the mist, there passed a smile of pride.

The Padre shrugged his shoulders, then turned his head anxiously to the hill, now standing out black against the pale sky, and sniffed the wind again.

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A young man was standing in the asphalt yard, yelling at the top of his voice to someone on the third floor, where some of the windows were still dark while others were splashes of light: 'Everything's O.K. I'm free now.'

Children were shrieking in the yard and on the stairs. On all six floors, lighted windows gleamed brightly on the iron railings of their little balconies. In a balcony on the third floor stood a woman, still and silent in all that noise and confusion, watching a tall young man in a hat who had rushed down the stairway. The first man, red-haired, red-bearded, with a white kerchief loosely knotted at his throat over an open-necked sports shirt, met the second in the middle of the yard and directed his attention upwards with a jerk of his thumb. The second man looked up and waved goodbye, the woman went back indoors and the two men walked off towards the street.

'What a lot everybody eats,' cried the red-haired one, nicknamed Rosso. 'Nothing but the smell of frying all over the house. The very thought of it makes me sick.'

The other touched his hat to a little fellow in shirt-sleeves, who was sitting astride a wooden chair in the gateway, then asked his companion in a serious tone: 'Have you found a job yet?'

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'Listen, Celestino,' Rosso replied, stopping short and gripping him by the sleeve. 'I came to go for a walk with you. I can't go by myself. In a minute I'll have to light a cigarette, I'm so much on edge. Where to go I don't know. I come with you so as to keep my spirits up and you ask me if I've found work. No, I haven't, and I couldn't care less. If you want to know, you bore me stiff. Is it that wife of yours who's made you such a softie? You don't seem like my pal Celestino any more. You're more like my father. You wear a hat like him, too. You'd better watch it! My father uses his belt on his wife.'

Jerking his arm away, Celestino replied: 'If a man resorts to a belt, it means he's no good with his hands. Only cads treat their wives that way. But what's that got to do with Gina? Or with you?'

'Me? . . . Nothing. I was just talking. You started wrong. Anyway, you're too touchy.'

'What d'you think you can teach me? All you know about women is what you learned from negresses!'

Rosso raised his arm and slapped Celestino's shoulder. Celestino, still annoyed, stared at him with narrowed eyes, but seeing him smile he relaxed and smiled back. 'Never talk about women,' Rosso exclaimed, 'except after a good dinner. We're good friends. Let's leave your wife out of it. Celestino, Celestino, we're getting old: you stick to your wife, I stick to my short temper. We won't talk about her, nor about whether I've got work or not. Where are we going?'

'For a walk. It's chilly.'

Under the trees of the main road the street-lamps cast patches of light alternating with zones of darkness, and the shadows of the two men seemed to dance along the pavement as they walked. Rosso had lit a cigarette and was

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drawing long puffs at it. Celestino raised his hat to a slim girl who suddenly shot round a corner.

'That girl,' he murmured, 'started working in the shop a year ago. She's already well in with the business manager.'

'To tell the truth, you envy her her career.'

'I? Jealous of her? She's playing a dirty game, not aiming at a career. I wouldn't touch her if she was washed in petrol.'

'Not if she were washed already, but maybe you'd like to wash her! Still, that's your wife's concern. There was a time, when you didn't wear a hat, when you greeted girls very differently. You're not the same man now, Celestino . . .'

Celestino shrugged his shoulders, and Rosso went on . . . 'And what an idea! Washing a girl in petrol . . .'

Celestino turned to look at a gang of kids rushing out from a side road, shrieking and yelling, streaming across the avenue behind them, piling up on a seat and making noises like machine-gun fire, while the smallest boy circled round them, waving his arms and yelling: 'Cops! Look out! Cops!'

Celestino shrugged his shoulders, and Rosso went on: 'Pregnant women get ideas like that! And then set fire to the petrol! It must have been a woman who invented the flame-thrower! Now we're back at your wife again!'

Celestino twisted round and asked in a dry tone: 'Have you found a job?'

Rosso stopped short, scratched his head and looked at his friend, lifting a hand to protect himself. 'What fools we are!' he exclaimed.

'What d'you want us to do,' asked Celestino, 'other than talking about women?'

'There was a time when you enjoyed a pint . . .'

'Now that's something that Gina really does object to.'

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She wouldn't say anything about Carmela, but she'd go up in flames if I went home drunk.'

'I wonder what became of Carmela. We were happy, that year.'

'In those days all the girls encouraged us to have a good time with them. That's why I married Gina. Right from our first dance together, she told me that whenever she smells wine on a man's breath she wants to box his ears.'

'Did she box yours?'

'Women get these ideas! Understandable, poor things! It's better to be jealous of another woman than of a pint. Another woman is at least a woman.'

'The real reason,' Rosso said, stopping and taking his cigarette from his mouth, 'was explained to me by a fellow I met in Massawa, where the people understand that sort of thing. They all have several wives, down there. He said that a man who comes home drunk has the same glazed eye, the same besotted look, as when he's been to bed with them. Rivalry! Competition! He says that the Arabs don't understand these things.'

'Now she's expecting a baby, even the smell of it makes her sick.'

'Does she allow you orange-ade?'

Celestino halted with a smile in front of the sloping window of a tobacconist's shop and gestured to his friend to wait for him. 'It's a good thing she'll let you smoke,' Rosso cried.

Rosso waited a while, listening to the noise of a radio blaring through an open window behind the trees, then he mounted the step of the shop and found Celestino, leaning on the counter chatting with the proprietor. 'What are you selling him?' he asked. 'The radio?'

Celestino waved his hand impatiently, said a couple of words to the shop-keeper and turned round with a smile.

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'No need to shout!' he exclaimed. 'I'm just having a look at a set.' They vanished into the back of the shop and in a minute or two the proprietor came back. Rosso was sitting in a corner, lighting another cigarette. 'Are you the one who's been in Africa?'

Lifting his eyes, Rosso gazed at the shop-keeper's plump round face with its huge moustache, and the patch of skin showing through his ragged singlet where his shirt was unbuttoned. 'That's stale news,' he replied.

'I did the other thing.' Then Rosso noticed that the fat man had lost a hand. The old scar was pale against the rounded, thickened stump. 'Is that how you got hold of a tobacco shop?' he replied.

'Got hold of it?' roared the other. 'I pay the rates, the rent and the taxes.' A customer came in, bought a cigar, paid for it and went out. The fat man continued, thrusting his stump into his belt: 'Is it true that in Abyssinia they gave old soldiers the special concession of running a tobacco shop free of rent, rates and taxes for ten years?'

'They even gave them cars for doing the rounds of their customers.'

'Do me a favour and give me a straight answer. I'm asking you if it's true that men mutilated in that campaign were given these concessions?'

'I'm not mutilated.'

'So I see,' replied the other shortly, looking him straight in the face. 'Where were you posted?'

'Somewhere where we got our smokes free.'

At that moment Celestino came into the shop and said a few words under his breath to the proprietor who was eyeing Rosso darkly. Finally he patted him on the shoulder, murmured: 'Top price' and went out pushing his friend in front of him. Once outside, Celestino remarked: 'These little jobs pay for Gina's clothes.'

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'You're doing fine,' exclaimed Rosso. 'Cheat your firm and make a bit on the side. Otherwise they'll cheat you. Pity you married Gina. When I was over there I used to say: "Once I'm discharged I'll get away from this heat, draw all my back pay and go into partnership with Celestino." Instead, you pulled a fast one and went into partnership with Gina.'

'Anyway, you've spent all your pay.'

'Down to the last penny. Money you get from the war never lasts long. A man says: "I can stay here," and he starts spending; he makes so many stops on his way home from the army, and the notes simply fly. Then he gets down-hearted; he remembers Pinotto, who washed his feet one day and on the next was crushed on the rocks like a sparrow; he thinks of Celestino who has got married and forgotten all about him; and it's all up. He sings a bit, has a couple of drinks. It's lonely in Naples, especially at night. If you've seen it, you've seen it.'

'Tell me, is it true that after a battle you can smell burned flesh?'

'Don't talk of smells.'

'Did you do any shooting?'

'At birds.'

'Is it true that'

'You're worse than that fellow with only one hand. Why didn't you come and see for yourself? A nice little trip with your wife. You were sent into the world to travel, weren't you? It's the finest work there is, travelling. When a man has the chance. You ought to take Gina there—the girl who can't bear the smell of a man's breath when he's had a drink. If I had the chance, I'd go back there tomorrow.'

Talking heatedly, they had come to a dark open space. On the far side of it shone a row of wide, well-lighted windows behind a line of potted shrubs. In front stood a

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crowd of idle sight-seers, peering through the leaves and listening to the loud orchestra. 'I never went to the *Paradisio* again,' said Rosso. 'Never went dancing, after that time in Turin. Once, in Naples, I met a girl from Turin in a dance-hall. She didn't even recognise my accent. I was just so much scorched earth, to her. I knew she was from Turin by the way she laughed and said: "Watch out! My man's jealous." They say that down there women are closely guarded, but her man was a rotter. He sent her out dancing and pocketed her tips. The girl gave me the glad eye when I told her where I came from, and when we'd gone round once I wanted to stay, but she said: "Get along with you! Go on! You're not in Africa now. It took the African campaign to get a Turin man to grow a beard".'

In front of the *Paradisio* they stopped to look inside at the high walls painted pale green and decorated with brightly coloured murals of palm trees, naked negroes, leopards and antelopes. The orchestra, all in black, was blaring away in a niche at the back of the room and the dance floor was crowded with couples absorbed in close embrace. A sergeant in a trim-fitting uniform was crossing the room. The broad windows stood wide open to the cool evening air.

'How it's changed, like me,' exclaimed Rosso. 'This isn't the *Paradisio* any longer. What about Carmela and Lidia and Ginetta? Where do they go dancing now? Don't the local lads come here any more?'

'The atmosphere's quite different, now,' Celestino said. 'We had some high old times here, but that's all over. Try and go in there in shirt-sleeves, as you are now! They'd send for the manager!'

'It's full of people from Naples.'

'No. It's just that life has changed. You mentioned

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Lidia. I saw her last winter in a fur coat and I don't think she'd stolen it.'

'I'd like to see M. Berto's face!'

'He's not the boss here now. He's gone to ground somewhere. A man from Rome took over the place and altered it all, even put in a new dance-floor. He had the rooms repainted, advertised in the papers, put on a cashier and doubled the orchestra. People drink bubbly wines and eat in little cubicles. He's spent a lot, but it's paid him. People come in cars.'

'It's the women's fault. If Carmela and Ginetta came back you'd soon see a change in the atmosphere.'

'Try it yourself, with your beard,' Celestino laughed.

Rosso slipped his fingers between his collar and the kerchief and stood hesitating, fingering the material. Then he laughed. 'To think I bought this in Massawa as Indian silk! I'll bet it's rayon! It's already in shreds, like the note I paid for it.'

'Perhaps it's because you don't wash your neck.'

'Neck? Imagine me washing my neck, with the sort of life I lead! Down in Africa, a beard and a kerchief marked a man as a sultan.'

'With that tanned face of yours you look like the Negus of Abyssinia himself!'

'If only I had the money he has!'

'Try and get it from him!'

Rosso's eyes wandered along the green shrubs to the corner of the square and the line of gleaming cars parked there. 'So to dance with a Turin girl I'll have to go to Naples? This isn't the *Paradisio*! It's all very well for you to grin! You've got a wife.'

'Cheer up! They've changed its name. It's not the *Paradisio* any longer. It's called *Nuovo Fiore*.' He took Rosso's arm and went on: 'Come on, Milio. They'll make

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us pay if we stop here much longer.' Rosso allowed himself to be led away from the square into a long road where the street lamps were few and far between. He drew the last puffs from the stub of his cigarette, almost burning his fingers, and threw away the end. 'Aren't you smoking tonight?' he asked Celestino.

'Half a cigar, perhaps, when I'm sitting down quietly. It's more healthy, and it's cheaper.'

'A man who's got money can make savings.' Rosso had been dragging his feet on the pavement. Now he stopped short, raised his head and asked: 'Where shall we finish the evening?'

'Let's get a breath of air. I never go out.'

'I've been wandering round pavements ever since this morning. The next café we come to, I'm putting my feet under the table. What d'you say?'

'All right. Just for a minute.'

On they went. The road seemed endless and they did not meet a soul. Now and then a car swished quietly past, its headlights streaming over their shoulders, sending their shadows dancing and picking out every stone. Then the darkness closed in behind them again, the red glow fading to black. Celestino remarked: 'With all the cafés there are in the centre, why are we making for the outskirts? D'you want to end up in the fields?'

'There isn't even a tram. Here's a side road. Still, it's safer to turn back. If the worst comes to the worst we can always go to the *Paradisio*. There'll be something worth drinking, there. Strange, how much bigger Turin seems at night.'

When they reached the square they scarcely glanced at the streaming lights shining green on the row of shrubs, but made their way to a narrow alley in the far corner where they could hear the clang of a nearby tram. 'Good!' Rosso

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said. 'We're back in Turin again. Haven't you got anything to smoke? Have half of mine? Still, if I break it again there won't be any left. Never mind. We're sure to find a cigar end by this corner.'

On the corner they discovered a tiny bar with a little garden behind a wistaria-covered trellis, lit by a small unshaded electric bulb hanging like a fruit. They sat down on a couple of iron seats by a rickety table.

At the next table sat a young woman, a workman and a young baby. The baby was drinking from a beaker, holding it with both hands. A grey-haired woman came up, looking doubtfully at Rosso's great kerchief.

'Is this a café?' asked Celestino.

'Who cares?' Rosso replied. 'You've got to have a drink with me. I've still got two *lire*, and they'll both go on wine. Don't you like wine any more? Let's have a pint!' The woman went away. Celestino grimaced as he looked round at the company. 'I'm not the one who doesn't like it, you know.'

'But that's just it,' said Rosso. 'If you like it, that's enough! What the devil! Look how the kid's sucking it up! He's losing no time.'

At that moment the child took the beaker from his lips and gazed solemnly around with two enormous eyes, getting his breath back with a gasp. Catching Rosso's eye, he choked and coughed so hard that the old workman leaned over and patted him on the back. The wine arrived and the woman poured it out. Rosso took a deep draught and watched Celestino lifting his own glass to his lips.

'Damn!' he said. 'The wine's been watered. But at least we're drinking it in our own home town. D'you know, in Africa we had a thirst for water...? This isn't too bad. I like it.'

'I can drink it, myself,' said Celestino.

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‘Then drink up.’

Celestino took his half-cigar from his waistcoat pocket, felt it gently, leaned forward into the light and carefully put a match to it. After pulling at it a moment he waved it between two fingers and planted his elbow on the table, raising his glass with his other hand and taking another sip.

‘Good health!’ cried Rosso, draining his own glass. ‘Mine’s empty. Let me refill yours, too.’

Celestino put his hand over the top of his glass. Rosso filled his own to the brim, then tried to top up Celestino’s by force. Celestino pushed his arm aside and a splash of wine fell on the table. ‘Careful!’ he muttered.

‘Ah! You don’t like to see it wasted,’ Rosso remarked.

‘I don’t like us to look like a couple of drunkards.’

‘No fear,’ said Rosso, peering at him through narrowed eyes. ‘It would be fine, though. Drink up.’

Celestino gulped down half his wine. The glass was at once refilled.

Rosso planted both elbows on the table and stared at his friend. ‘This wine is like Turin,’ he began. ‘There’s more of the south in it than in Piedmont wine. Still, it’s warming, that’s the main thing. Would you believe that the southerners, when you live with them, are much the same as us? Rotters are rotters wherever you find them, but the right sort are so friendly you wouldn’t believe it. You’ve got to learn how to tell the good from the bad, though. They all talk the same queer lingo . . .’

‘At my firm we’ve got two Sicilians, the manager and the secretary. Two years ago, they had to stay in bed if they wanted their trousers pressed. Now they’ve each got a car . . .’

‘What of it? Any man can get on when he’s in a job. The trouble is finding work. I like them best when they’re doing nothing. They know, better than any, how to be idle.’

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Even at home they're like that, but you ought to see them when they've been posted overseas and have just arrived. The first thing they do is go for a walk.'

Rosso sipped his wine and gestured to his friend to do the same. Celestino, his eyes half-closed, drank a mouthful without moving. '... and when work is short they don't fuss about it, as we do. Not even when they have a family. They don't go looking for work. They go for a walk. A negro, on the other hand, if you leave him alone he sits down on the ground. Negroes drink ...'

'They must be fools. I've never heard of a negro who had learned to manage a machine.'

'... yet, for all the wine they've got there, Neapolitans don't drink it. They're grand company and all that, but they prefer aniseed. I could never understand them.' He moistened his lips and glared ironically at his companion. 'What are you doing? Acting the Neapolitan? Drink up.'

'Let me smoke,' Celestino protested. Rosso sniggered. 'Drink, I tell you. It's not allowed ...' Celestino shrugged his shoulders. Rosso drained his glass and turned to refill it.

'They've got some good wines,' he went on, putting his elbows on the table again, 'twenty degrees proof is nothing. I once drank some that was the colour of coffee, so strong that it left your mouth dry. Not like this thin stuff. If it hadn't a bit of the south in it ... Drink up. You can say that for once you resisted the wine cask. This is just water.'

'What's that palm wine like?' Celestino enquired.

'I never saw any. It must be something like elbow grease. But, now I come to think about it, the negroes drink it like so many monkeys.'

'What sort of wine can you get there?'

'All the negroes want is something with a strong smell and they gulp it down. They'll even drink petrol.'

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Rosso pushed a glass, filled to the brim, against Celestino's hand with a glance of invitation. Celestino lowered his head and drank from the overflowing edge pushing his lips forward.

In came two soldiers wearing grey-green battle dress, chasing each other into the corner like a couple of boys. Celestino eyed them casually through the smoke of his cigar, then his glance rested on the table where the three were still sitting. The baby had dropped off to sleep with his head on his arm beside the bottle; the workman was staring at nothing, rocking himself backwards and forwards in his chair with his hands in his pockets; the woman was picking at the crumbs and scraps of food littering the table among the empty paper bags. Rosso called the landlady: 'My bill, please.'

'You bought cigarettes, I'll pay.'

'I tell you I'm paying.'

'You aren't a millionaire.'

'But I haven't a wife to keep.' The landlady stood waiting. Celestino held out two *lire*. 'All right, then,' said Rosso. 'I'll pay for another. Landlady, a pint bottle.'

Celestino tried to get up, but Rosso held him by the sleeve with a pleading look. 'What have you drunk? Nothing. Are you afried of Gina?'

'It's nothing to do with Gina. I just don't want to make a pig of myself. I've got to work tomorrow.'

'Stay for a friend, Celestino. You can keep awake every now and then, even when you do make a pig of yourself. Just keep me company. I'm alone all day.' Celestino sat down again. '... And finish the bottle. We're getting along all right now. It's not too bad.'

Celestino did not drink. Instead he puffed nervously at the stub of his cigar. The wine arrived. Rosso paid for it hastily, poured out a glass for his companion, then refilled

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his own, smacked his lips and raised his elbow. 'You'll never get work,' Celestino exclaimed through clenched teeth.

'Ah,' replied Rosso, with a glint of malice in his eyes, 'I'm working this evening, only it's worse than navvying. My throat's rusty. I haven't had a drink for a month, because I must smoke. I've nothing left to pawn except this kerchief. What'll you give me for it?'

'A kick in the pants, and you can keep the thing. You've forgotten your own trade, that's what's the matter with you.'

'I messed about with lorries and cars over there, more than I ever did before. D'you really want to know what's the matter with me? I've never forgotten anything; it's you and the people I used to know, who've forgotten me. That's the whole story . . . Have another drink.'

Celestino threw away his cigar stub and moistened his lips. 'Get on with it,' stormed Rosso, seizing his elbow and leaning over him. 'You've forgotten how to drink.'

'Swine,' jeered Celestino, suddenly pulling away as the wine spilled over.

'No fear. Here's health . . .' and Rosso drank the toast.

Celestino wiped away the splashes from his clothes. 'You must think the war's still on,' he muttered. 'It's plain you've been with Neapolitans, you're so free with your hands.'

'Leave the war alone. You don't even know the smell of it. All you did in the war was operate a radio . . . Come on . . . no offence . . . let's drink on it.'

Celestino did not drink. Rosso put down his glass and went on: 'A fine thing, war. A man no longer thinks of anything. Later, he thinks of the danger. He lives a day at a time. You have your job, all the rest have theirs. The only thing to be afraid of is getting lost. I remember a fellow at Djema driving round on his axles with his helmet on his

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neck, filthy with sweat like a cyclist, who stopped me and cried: 'Where's my lot gone? Holy Mother of God, tell me where's my lot?' He'd only lost his column, but imagine what it's like to be lost in the open country, alone among all those trees like so many bundles of dry sticks. Who's coming to look for you then? You're forgotten, and above you fly the vultures.'

Rosso bent down, picked up the stub his friend had thrown down and lit it, burning his lips. He blew out the smoke and leaned on his elbows again, his eyes fixed on Celestino. 'I was lost myself, once,' he suddenly continued, talking as if he were alone. 'We were going back to Diredawa. The rains had started. Such great black clouds I'd never seen before. The sky seems wider, there. Late one afternoon I left camp for a bit of a walk in a flat muddy field. It looked like one of our fields after the grape harvest and it stank of corruption. The rain caught me outside the native village, coming down cats and dogs. I made for the first hut I could see, because I couldn't tell where the sky ended and the earth began. A man could have drowned. Inside were bundles of rags and eyes like cats. That was all I could see, it was so dark, but those blacks were watching me. Outside it was raining to split open the earth itself; I watched the splashes dancing in front of the door. I was thinking: "They'll stick a knife in my back here and now in revenge for the war." I stayed there I don't know how long, leaning against the door with my back to all that filth, bayonet in hand, ready to leap out. I didn't even notice the smell, I tell you.'

'And they didn't do anything to you after all?'

'What d'you think they were likely to do? They were afraid of me. But it taught me that to wage war men should keep together. To kill a man, if you're alone, is sheer madness.'

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'Have you done any killing yourself?' asked Celestino, rising to his feet.

'I don't know. Nobody knows. I've seen plenty of dead bodies, that's certain.'

'The rules of war. Shall we go?'

Rosso remained seated, his head raised, his thoughts far away. 'Don't you want us to finish the wine?' he stammered, picking up his glass.

'Leave it, for all I care.'

'Keep me company a little longer, Celestino. You've drunk so little! Gina won't say anything to you. She knows well enough that you're with me.'

'But that's just it,' said the other with a wry smile. 'It's because I'm with you that Gina's waiting up for me.'

'Does it bore you if I drink and if I talk about Africa? God! I was there, wasn't I? You asked me, anyway. You don't talk about anything, you don't. Tell me about Gina, then. When's the baby due? Finish your drink.'

Rosso emptied his glass and with a shaky hand refilled it with what was left in the bottle. 'Listen,' he cried to Celestino who was edging away under the pergola. 'I meant to make you drunk tonight, then I thought: No. He's in a job, and he's got a baby coming. Better not. But stay and keep me company.'

'You're a swine, Milio. Either come away now or stay here by yourself.'

'No! I won't come,' Rosso cried. 'It's either me or Gina. I haven't come back from Africa to take orders from another man's wife. If you're not free to have a pint when you like, you're no longer my pal Celestino Stay and drink here, you fool The negroes have got more sense than you have.' But Celestino had gone.

Gaol Birds

1

Not even one of the three prisoners could hear the sound of the sea. It was as smooth as oil, that day, and all of them lay on their camp beds with half-shut eyes as if they were drifting away to oblivion. Noise and voices from the street could be heard in the cell, bringing the atmosphere of sunshine, sand and torrid sea inside those thick walls.

A shadowy mass of large wooden crates had been piled up outside the two barred windows. High up, two gaps between them allowed prisoners to glimpse a narrow, lozenge-shaped patch of pale sky; lower down, little pin-points of light shone through holes and cracks in the old wood. The density of the shadow testified to the fierce heat of the sun outside.

‘The train’s coming,’ cried Nanni, jumping off the bed on his bare feet. The other two did not move. Nanni, holding up his trousers, ran to the window, strained his ears towards the sky outside, then turned to the other window. There was the clatter of a tin, ending in a splash. Nanni gave a cry and bent down.

‘Look at him! The swine! I ought to make you lick it up,’ shouted the fair-haired man, nicknamed Biondo, sitting up on his bed.

Nanni was hopping about, holding his toe. ‘Who left the

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can around?' he gasped. 'Don't blame me! I'm lamed for life! Talk to the ice-cream man.'

Biondo glanced at the tin pot that Nanni had quickly set upright again, then turned over on his bed and stretched himself, arching his chest in its red singlet until his rib-cage creaked. The third man, all in white, lay at full length with shoes on his feet and his grey beard in the air. As the other two fell silent he asked: 'Why's this boy so crazy about the train? Every day at this time he gets restless. It's not natural. If he doesn't learn to settle down quietly in prison, where will he learn?'

Biondo sniggered: 'When a fellow has a guilty conscience he thinks every train has come for him. They'll clap hand-cuffs on him and put him on a train. He'll take a trip to the police court and find himself in the dock with a couple of policeman. Then they'll read out his sentence – so many years hard labour! Look what a face he's making! They'll shave all your hair off, Nanni, put you in sackcloth, fix chains to your feet. How many chickens did you steal, Nanni?'

'I stole an ass like you.'

Biondo gleefully kicked up his heels, and his loose sandal shot off his toes to land on the old man's bed. 'Tell me, ice-cream man,' he said gaily, settling his hands behind his neck and crossing his legs, 'will they charge you with selling fags again?'

'A man can't even get a bit of sleep here any more,' stormed the old man, wandering over towards the door.

'Why didn't you bring along your little cart with your shop on it?' Biondo went on. 'For the six days you're doing we could have enjoyed ourselves. You'd have had your old woman, I'd have iced lemon and Nanni there could have cured these fits of his with ice-cream. Look how strung up he is!'

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Nanni was still clinging tightly to the bars, conscious of the burning heat of the wall through his thick serge clothing. His eyes were fixed on a shining crack in the crate outside, but he saw nothing. His ears were strained to catch every sound. Holiday-makers, who had wandered over to the station to enjoy the shade and watch the train go by, were strolling back to the beach – white-suited men, bare-headed women in sandals, shouting boys, crying babies, laughing girls. Nanni saw nothing: he tried to imagine what it was like, the road outside the prison leading down to the sea, but he didn't even know whether there were any trees or houses or flowerbeds. When they brought him in he hadn't thought to look.

Nanni turned round, streaming with sweat from having stood so long at the window. A noise was heard just outside the door, the sound of voices and a shuffling of feet. Even Biondo raised himself on his elbow and looked anxiously around. The voices echoed in the passage. As a louder tone rang out, the ice-cream man thrust out his beard in irritation and twisted round towards the other two. They were staring each other in the face. 'Oh, Biondo,' he laughed, 'Perhaps you're the one who's going on that trip. Or Nanni? It's a bit of good luck for whoever has to go. He'll travel in the cool and stay cool when he gets there. State prisons aren't like these provincial guard-houses!'

Biondo started up from his bed with a curse. 'Blood of Mary! A man can't get a bit of peace even in prison.'

Nanni, his eyes on the door, remarked softly: 'The train's a long way off by now. It's somebody coming, not going.'

The noise continued. Someone said goodnight and went away. They heard Ciccia talking and giving orders, the sound of water splashing into a basin, the gasps and grunts of a man washing himself.

'Who on earth can be arriving by train at this dead end?'

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said Biondo. 'If you ask me, they've come to trim that fool's beard.'

'Nanni hasn't even got a beard yet,' the old man replied.

'He'll have time to grow one in prison.'

'I expect it's someone else they've arrested - from a village where they don't stop at the first man to be killed.'

A key grated in the lock, the bolt shot back and Ciccia appeared, walking sideways and pushing the door open with his buttocks. Nanni stared at the doorway, bright in contrast with the dusk inside.

'There isn't anywhere else, your reverence. I'll put you in here for now,' Ciccia mumbled through his moustaches. 'You won't have a bed to sleep on, but surely to goodness someone will move over . . . just for one night.'

In the sudden draught there appeared on the threshold a dark man in a dirty grey jacket much too small for him. His face was gaunt, his eyelids drooped from exhaustion and his tired eyes glittered as he looked around.

'Make yourself at home, your reverence. There aren't any more beds. One of these chaps will have to let you have his . . . the youngest . . . Nanni. We'll see, later on . . . Now I must see about getting something to drink . . . we're all thirsty. Now you others, behave yourselves. No foul talk. The reverend's listening to you . . . Have the goodness . . .'

The door closed again. The man with the fleshless face came forward a step or two and raised his hand. 'I greet you all,' he said quietly. Biondo had risen, shouldered past him, and was now looking him full in the face. The ice-cream man was standing, too, and smoothing his beard.

'You're a priest in disguise, I suppose?' Biondo burst out.

'Yes, I am a priest,' replied the other, not moving.

Biondo glared at him, then threw himself down on his bed. 'And, pardon me, what have you come here for?'

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'Stop that! Don't bother him. It's none of our business,' the ice-cream man broke in. 'Shut up, you gutter-snipe. The reverend came by train? Like a turkish bath, eh?'

'My sons, you must excuse me,' said the priest screwing up his eyes. 'I'm still blinded by the bright sunshine outside and I can't see you very well. I hope I'm not disturbing you. I shall be gone first thing in the morning.'

'And where are you going?' Biondo asked.

'They're taking me to the islands to be interned.'

'Even priests?'

'Why not?' said the ice-cream man. 'Justice concerns everybody.'

'Internment? What can you have done to be interned?'

'When they can't put a man in prison,' the ice-cream man explained, 'they send him to an internment camp.'

By now the priest's eyes were almost shut. Nanni, who was nearest him, noticed that his cheeks were darkened by a three-day beard, and though his eyelids were weighed down with weariness his eyes had a vigorous gleam.

'And this one, who hasn't spoken? Why, he's still a boy!' exclaimed the priest in consternation.

'Nanni's the one for chickens,' Biondo explained. 'He got caught in a trap the night before last.'

'You, a thief! Must I believe it? But wasn't your mamma looking after you? Stealing other people's property!'

'Look here, reverend,' said the ice-cream man. 'You're right, of course. I'm not sticking up for Nanni. He deserves what he's got, and more. But with a family like that, why pick on the boy? Let's be fair. They all had a go at those chickens.'

Nanni backed away, his eyes blinded by tears, and bumped his shoulders against the wall in silence. When his storm of passion had spent itself he turned round to see the old grey-beard sitting beside the priest on a camp bed.

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The priest had his eyes bent on the ground. A shirt with a frayed white collar encircled his neck. He had no tie. His hands were resting on the heavy black cloth that covered his knees and his short sleeves left his forearms bare. Nanni suddenly noticed that the priest was furtively rubbing his wrists. Both men were looking down.

‘Did you travel here in handcuffs?’ asked Biondo.

Once more the bolt shot back and Ciccía reappeared, carrying a loaf in one hand and under his arm a few covers which he put down on the stool. Nanni saw his eyes shining.

‘Ciccía,’ said Biondo, ‘you’ll at least give the reverend a taste of that thin wine you drink yourself when there’s nobody else about.’

‘Sure! And why not to you all! Why not! This isn’t exactly a tavern. Open and shut, open and shut. They all give orders as if they were fine gentlemen. I’m not exactly a jailer. I’m not talking to you, reverend, this doesn’t concern you. I’m talking to these oafs here. And they still call us “executioners” . . . Now, how are you getting on? Bad company, eh? However you like to look at it, we’re in prison. Has anyone offered you his bed yet?’ We’ll wait . . .’

He was on his way out when Biondo called after him: ‘The peephole, Ciccía. The peephole for his reverence . . .’ Ciccía quickly came back, looking confused and sucking his moustaches. ‘I mustn’t get in a muddle,’ he muttered. ‘I was looking for the covers and they’re here already.’ He drew up the stool and sat down on it with a sigh, blocking the doorway with his shoulders. ‘There’s no place for you and no peace for me,’ he went on, looking at the priest, ‘even the murderer is grumbling. These fine wool covers are not good enough for him. Yes, ever since yesterday we’ve had an assassin here. All the morning he was doing nothing but call for water; he didn’t even want to drown

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himself. That would have been better for him and for everyone else.'

The priest, who had been listening with bowed head, suddenly raised his eyes. 'Gentlemen,' he said, putting his hands together, 'this man is in a worse position than either of us here. Where is he? Is he asking for a priest?'

'He's probably still furious that he was caught,' said Biondo.

'But what did he do? Who is he?' the priest persisted.

'Before yesterday, no-one knew who he was,' said Ciccìa. 'He's one of those country bumpkins from the lower slopes of the mountains. It seems he's been working at La Spezia. As for the crime, three knife wounds in the victim's stomach . . . women's gossip . . . we don't really know. But he must have been pretty drunk because he hasn't eaten a thing all day. All he's asked for is water, and he's not the sort to suffer from fever . . . Have you given the reverend any fresh water?'

'Is he a young man, then?'

'It seems he was due to be called up this year. There were lots of things he wouldn't tell, even to the sergeant: he'll tell them at La Spezia . . .'

Nanni saw the priest leap to his feet and stride over to the window, he barely had time to bend down to push the tin pot out of the way under a bed, splashing its contents over his feet as he did so. Hardly noticing him, the priest paced backwards and forwards, followed by the eyes of everyone present. Up and down he went, up and down, his folded arms clutching his elbows against his chest, his lips quivering, his head bowed. They all stared at his tonsure, until the ice-cream man broke the silence, turning to Ciccìa: 'If he can prove he was drunk when he killed that man, he may get away with twelve years or so.'

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The priest faced Ciccia and asked: 'But is he alone in the world? Hasn't anybody visited him?'

Ciccia was bewildered. He winked, looked up and replied: 'It's a fine thing to talk of visiting him. He'll get justice, when the time comes.'

'But hasn't his family come? Aren't there any women at home? The poor fellow needs help desperately. Doesn't the parish priest visit the prison?'

The ice-cream man and Ciccia replied in unison: 'He can't, without special permission.' Ciccia went on: 'The women will come, worse luck. They stick themselves outside the doors with their babies in their arms and a man can't move a step or they're under his feet. Once the inspector . . .'

'But the parish priest? Doesn't he come? It's his duty.'

Ciccia thrust out his lips: 'I've never seen him.'

Biondo was stretched out on the bed, nibbling a piece of bread. 'At La Spezia,' he said, 'there was a friar who heard my friend's confession. But La Spezia is a different city.'

In a state of great agitation the priest lowered his eyes to Ciccia's feet. Nanni had the impression that he wanted to spit. His thin cheeks turned red. Then with an effort he swallowed, and raised his chin. Ciccia was watching him, and winked at the ice-cream man. Wearily he rose from the stool, his bunch of keys jingling. He said to the priest: 'Confess these lads, reverend. It's not often they see a priest. Hear their confessions. As for that other one I'll have to confess him myself. Orders are orders. I'll come back again with the water.'

He had scarcely gone out and hung the chain over the spyhole when Biondo leaped from his bed and threw his crust of bread at the door. 'Rotter!' he exclaimed. 'Water for us and wine for him. I suppose it's no good talking to

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him, ice-cream man, in spite of the cigars he pinches from you?"

At that moment a door slammed; footsteps ran past; there was inarticulate shout and a jangling of keys. The priest had seated himself on the bed again, staring down at the flagstones between his knees, lost in thought. Nanni saw Biondo run to the door and give a shout of excitement at something he saw outside. Ciccia's voice could be heard in violent protest. Then, suddenly, another yell by the door made Biondo fall back and slam the peephole shut. They were locked in.

2

To Rocco's amazement, the door of his cell was not fastened. It did not even creak as he pushed it open. The passage beyond was full of light and there was not a soul in sight. Between the railings he could see the shining cobblestones of the street, only a step or two away.

The key of the main gate was in the lock. Rocco turned it, cautiously pulled it towards him and tip-toed through the entrance. Behind one of the barred doors a voice rose in excitement and with one bound Rocco shot into the street.

At the end of the narrow road the corner of a building stood out against the sky. That must be the barracks of the *carabinieri*. Rocco crept past it on the opposite side, hunching his shoulders, trying to accustom his eyes to the dazzling glare, ready to run forward or go back. Every second he expected a burst of firing.

He reached the side turning. Not a soul to be seen. Sounds reached him from the beach – the hum of a crowd, bells in the distance, snatches of music. A light breeze

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fanned his neck and he raised his head, savouring the air of freedom. He saw a clump of bright green leaves on an old red wall, and beyond it a stretch of pale, quiet sky.

All along the street he was watched by an endless row of windows, their blinds lowered against the heat. He crept along close to the walls and came to a little footpath used by bathers going to or from the beach. Blindly, Rocco dived into it, bumping into a fat woman who was coming up. She wore shabby sandals on her great bare feet and was dragging a sunburned little girl along behind her. She nudged Rocco sharply with her elbow and he jumped aside without looking up or listening to what she said. A little further on stood a large grey car, blocking the way and sounding its horn. No one could get by. Rocco rushed wildly in the other direction and did not stop until he reached the house where Petro lived. He opened the street-door quietly, peered into the cool shadows of the passage, rushed up the stairs and knocked at Petro's apartment, his heart in his mouth.

A little girl came to open the door, her face white in the gloom. Petro wasn't at home, she said. What did he want? Rocco patted her cheek and went in, pushing the door shut with his shoulders. The child followed him into the tiny kitchen. 'What do you want?' she asked again.

'I want Petro. I've come all the way from La Spezia. Look how I'm sweating! I'm wet through! Why isn't Petro here?'

Half frightened, half pert, the child stared at him and said: 'Are you the man they arrested?'

Rocco's sweat froze on him. 'What d'you know about it?'

'Petro told us this morning. You're Rocco! I know by your little moustache! Whatever would mummie say if she

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saw you! It's lucky she's gone to Grandma's to help with the flower-picking.'

'So Petro's not in?'

'Petro's working at the Neptune. Why don't you go and look for him on the beach?'

'What did Petro say?'

'Then you really are Rocco. You haven't come from La Spezia after all. You've been in prison.'

'What did Petro say?'

'He only said they'd arrested you, but mother's been grumbling all the morning that Petro's friends were the wrong sort; she'd always known it, and the same thing would happen to Petro, too, if he went on wasting his time at La Spezia instead of working. But surely they wouldn't arrest Petro, would they?'

'Listen. They haven't arrested me, either,' Rocco replied, looking her straight in the face. 'As you see, I'm free. I only want to talk to Petro.'

'Then you'd better go and find him,' the child retorted, running to open the door.

'No,' Rocco cried, darting after her. 'I'm not in any hurry. I'll wait. When will he be back?'

'When it begins to get dark. They shut the place then.'

Rocco sat down by the window, where the last rays of the setting sun slanted through the dusty air. He pulled one of the shutters across and hid behind it, as if he were still behind bars. Thus concealed, all he could see was a patch of sky, but by leaning forward a little he could make out, through the luminous haze, the dry, flowery slopes of the steep high cliff beyond the beach. The little girl had gone back to her work at the table and was vigorously pounding a mass of greenstuff with a crescent shaped chopper. Now and then she turned to shake a sizzling frying pan over the pungent smoke of the fire.

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Rocco felt for a cigarette. He hadn't one. He took off his thick jacket, leaned his chin on his hands and sat staring at the sky. Slowly the quivering heat of the sun died down and the air grew clearer. Suddenly he shivered, looking down at the floor, wild-eyed. He heard the child ask: 'You aren't ill, are you?'

'Is there a moon tonight?' he said.

'Oh, yes. We're going out in the boat with the fishermen. Are you coming too?'

Rocco smiled, putting a finger to his lips to silence her. The room was nearly dark now. The little girl went out and brought back a heavy oil lamp, carrying it carefully in both hands. Before she could light it they heard a knock. Hastily she put the lamp down and ran to open the door. Rocco looked up, his heart in his mouth. The child cried: 'It's Rocco! Rocco's here!' and Petro rushed in. He had on a dark singlet and his arms were bare. Rocco had jumped to his feet. In the gloom he could hardly see Petro's face. 'I've come to supper,' he stammered.

'Did they let you out?'

'I found the door open.'

'But did they release you? Are you free?' Petro gasped.

'Is it likely they'd release anyone? I found the door open so I walked out.'

'Did you really murder that fellow, then? You've escaped?'

'Why shouldn't I kill him? Of course I did. I rather wish I hadn't, so that I could do it again! Are you like all the rest? You blame me, too?'

The little girl stood looking up at them, listening. Petro swung round and shouted at her: 'Light the lamp, Mina, and get out of here.'

She obeyed, and Rocco jumped up to close the other shutter as the bright light flooded the little kitchen. Mina

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carefully turned down the wick. 'Off you go!' Petro cried.

As she went, Petro kept his eyes fixed on the wall. In bold letters across his navy blue singlet was the name "Neptune". His jaws were clenched, his looks as wild as if he himself were Rocco. 'Did anyone see you come in here?' he asked sharply with a break in his voice.

'No. I got away without anybody seeing.'

'Why did you come here?'

'Where should I go? I don't know anybody else. It was broad daylight, but I'll get away tonight.'

'Keep your voice down. How could a man escape in daylight! Did you break the bars?'

'It's easy to see you've never been in prison,' Rocco grinned. 'The bars are iron. I just went through the door. That old fool with the moustaches must have thought he'd locked me in, but he shot the bolt outside the staple. Don't worry. I'll be on my way tonight.'

Mina's shrill little voice piped up outside the door: 'The sauce is burning.' She ran across to the stove.

Petro edged round the table, seeing nothing. Rocco was sitting down again with his back to the window. Neither spoke while the little girl busied herself over a saucepan. The noises from the street sounded faint and far away.

Rocco asked: 'Got a cigarette?'

'Is Rocco staying to supper?' Mina enquired. Petro made no reply. With the cigarette between his lips, Rocco leaned forward to light it at the match Petro was holding, and noticed how the other's hand was trembling. Petro shook out the tiny flame, exaggerating the gesture in the hope of concealing his agitation. Both men remained silent a while longer. Mina set plates on the table.

'Who's this woman?' Petro burst out.

'What woman?'

'Everyone knows you kept going to that boarding house

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because of a woman. You were all over her! It's plain enough you didn't go there just to watch her blow her nose!

Rocco's face was tense as he looked up. Mina's eyes dropped to the plates. 'If nobody knows any more than that, so much the better,' Rocco replied in a low voice. 'No one must know. I mean that, whichever way it goes. Is there a moon tonight?'

'What's the moon got to do with it?'

'With women it makes a lot of difference. It suits them, somehow. Is it very bright, these nights?'

'Why?'

'Because I've got to go out, you fool, and if it's moonlight they can catch me.' Rocco lowered his voice at the last few words. Mina was still gazing at him, fascinated.

'I really don't know what you can do,' Petro sounded at his wits' end. 'As for getting on board a boat, you know perfectly well that's quite impossible.'

'I know,' Rocco replied softly.

'D'you want to get back to the mountain where you came from?'

'Too far away. No good, anyway. That's the first place they'll go to look for me.'

'Then why bother to escape? You should have thought of that first. In here, you'd die like a rat. Is that what you want?'

'I'd die like a cat, instead!' Rocco's lips twisted in an ugly grin.

Mina placed some red peppers and ripe tomatoes on the table, lifting them dripping wet from a bucket. At a brusque gesture from Petro, Rocco pulled his chair up to the table, finishing his cigarette while Petro sliced a tomato and impatiently asked the child for some oil. She brought oil and salt, avoiding Rocco's eyes, then turned back to the stove to flour some fish.

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'So your mamma is out?' Rocco said to her, stubbing out his cigarette. 'You manage very well without her, I can see . . .' He turned to Petro: 'What do they pay you at the Neptune?'

'Just chicken feed. Get on with your supper.'

'You don't get tomatoes when you're inside,' Rocco remarked with his mouth full, 'and it's as hot as hell. So it is in here,' he went on, turning to the window. 'It's as bad as being in prison.'

'Open the shutters, Mina,' Petro told her, 'or we'll melt. Not too much though. We don't want anyone to look in.' The street noises sounded clearer now, and the two men ate in silence. Mina took the spluttering fish from the pan, put the dish on the table and sat down on the vacant side.

'I just can't understand how anyone could do such a stupid thing for the sake of a woman,' Petro began, chewing steadily.

'Look here! You knew me pretty well at La Spezia,' Rocco interrupted him. 'I come from the mountain, but I'm no fool. Who was it warned you to be careful when you were acting the goat with that little strumpet Rosa? She was out for all she could get. And who told you . . .?' He broke off and glanced at Mina, who was sitting with her elbows on the table, listening attentively. 'I was the one who understood women then, wasn't I? So mind your own business. I had my reasons.'

'Did you love her?'

Rocco made no reply.

'You wanted to marry her?'

'If I had loved her, she's the one I'd have killed,' said Rocco, tight-lipped.

Petro looked up from his plate, noticed Mina and shouted at her: 'What are you doing here? Get along outside.'

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'Let her have her supper,' Rocco said. 'She'd better stay . . . as long as I'm here.'

The child had jumped back, but now she glanced at him timidly. Rocco smiled at her. Her grave manner did not change, but her look grew pleading.

Petro hastily finished eating, jumped to his feet and started pacing up and down the room. 'You must have been drunk, then,' he began in a tone of conviction. 'Whatever made you do such a dreadful thing? You say yourself that she didn't matter to you . . .'

Slowly, Rocco also stood up. 'I'll be going,' he said quietly. 'It's dark now.'

'If you didn't want to marry her, what was the sense of it? Why bother? . . . Mina, it's time we were off to the beach. The fishermen are waiting for us. Are you ready yet?'

Mina nodded her chin up and down, her wide eyes fixed on Petro. 'Petro's coming with you,' Rocco reassured her. 'I must go now, Petro.'

Petro stood looking embarrassed, his eyes cast down. 'And where will you go?' he murmured. 'If they catch sight of you . . .'

'Don't worry. I'll be gone in a minute . . . and I shan't come back. Have you got a dark singlet you could let me have? I'll leave you my shirt and jacket.' Petro hesitated and Rocco went on: 'Just so that they won't recognise me . . . I'll leave my jacket . . .'

'Rot!' Petro exclaimed. 'I don't want your jacket. Between ourselves, it's not for the value of it, but suppose they catch you with my singlet? You know they always ferret out everything. Who d'you think is going to see you in the dark?'

Rocco picked up his jacket, threw it over his shoulders and looked around the room. He went over to the table and

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picked up a small loaf. 'You'll give me this?' he asked, and stuffed it into his coat pocket. 'Is the road clear? I'm ready now.'

As Petro turned towards the door, Rocco quickly picked up a knife from the table and slipped it into his pocket. Encountering Mina's astonished eyes he smiled at her and said: 'Bye, Mina. Don't ever tell anyone I came to see you.' Then he followed Petro outside.

Neither spoke as they groped their way downstairs. When they reached the street door, Petro leaned out into the hot night air and whispered: 'This pavement's in shadow. The moon's already shining on the other side of the street. See? Wait! Someone's coming.'

Rocco, concealed behind the door, remarked in a low voice: 'To think that in a couple of years your little sister will be a woman, too!'

'Quick!' said Petro. 'Now! Keep close to the wall.'

Rocco shot out into the darkness.

3

'I'm the ice-cream seller,' said the old man in white. 'This is a bit of bad luck for us, you know, reverend. I was given six days in gaol instead of a fine that the magistrate was good enough to impose on me because of some milk I used....'

'Tell us how it is they never confiscate your little cart,' Biondo interrupted.

'That's simple enough. It belongs to my wife. As a matter of fact, so do I, this poor delinquent, yours truly.'

The prison cell was stifling; a wave of intense heat was coming not from the setting sun but from the very stones of the wall and the air itself. The priest felt it full on his face

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and could hardly breathe for the smell of the sun-baked walls and the concentrated stench of human acidity. Nanni was still watching him closely as he stood motionless in the heavy atmosphere.

'Don't you ever get the sea air here?' he asked the old man.

'Sea air? For prisoners? What a joke! They even rob us of the breeze the good God sends from the land.'

'We're like capons in a coop,' laughed Biondo, 'only we live on short rations and capons don't.' The others saw his taut face and sweaty skin shining as he winked and showed his teeth in a smile. The priest raised his head with an effort and looked at him.

The old man enquired: 'You don't live by the sea?'

'I come from Alexandria. I live in the country.'

'And . . . did they make you a bourgeois?' Even Nanni on his bed was listening with close attention.

'It's as God wills,' the priest said. 'It would cause a scandal . . . my calling . . .'

'But you're still a priest, aren't you?'

'Of course,' he replied, looking round at them all. 'Ordination is like Holy Baptism: a priest is a priest before God, no matter what happens; just as a man who becomes a Christian must answer to God for his faith, whatever happens, and especially if he has relapsed. Never believe that any sin can cut us off from God. That is a most grave error, the sin of Judas.' Biondo stood slouching carelessly against the wall, listening with a sneer. The priest went on: ' . . . We must remember that His mercy is infinite, and it is precisely when we have offended Him, sinned most bestially, that he stretches out His arm to us.' Biondo still listened, jeering openly. The priest could just see Nanni in the darkness, and felt the old man breathing on his shoulder. He lowered his eyes and continued: 'Whatever

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happens, we must always forgive others as the Lord forgives us; and forgive ourselves in others because evil exists in every man's heart, and no matter what happens, what injustice, it is always our own fault before anyone else's.'

'By your accent I take it you're from Piedmont,' Biondo said. Swinging round towards the boy he went on: 'Hi, Nanni! Aren't you going to sweep up tonight, with the reverend here?'

Nanni jumped up and bent swiftly over the black flagstones, both arms busy. The old man leaned forward from his bed and asked in a confidential tone: 'How ever did you land up here, reverend? People working against you?'

The priest scanned that dark and wrinkled face with its two little grey eyes glittering behind a fringe of hair, but did not answer.

'A word too many?' the other persisted.

The priest saw the two boys watching him; Biondo was just taking his lips from the water pitcher. He replied in a low voice, without hesitation: 'I was wrong in what I said and did. Whatever happens to me, I deserve it.'

'Sure,' the old man answered, 'they can always put a man in the wrong. But you can defend yourself. Why don't you? A statement to someone . . .'

'What about us learning to hold a pen? Eh, ice-cream?' Biondo broke in.

'You shut up, you scum! In my day they didn't teach us to read and write, but to stay in a job. The likes of you, knowing how to read!'

The priest heard their voices drumming on his temples in the close-shut stillness. No distant sounds from outside reached them there, though beyond the black beams of the door there was still air and light.

'Take it from me,' the old man said, 'if a man breaks the law they put him in gaol. You're not in gaol, so you

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haven't broken the law. You'll have offended somebody or other.'

'I wish I could tell you something better,' the priest answered, 'and with more authority. I only hope you won't imagine some scandal or other from what I've said or how I seem to you. I know that nobody in prison is ever guilty; it's always a mistake; but I know too, that no man lives innocently. We are poor men, sinners; you may think you have good reason to sin, but listen to me. If I tell you I deserve whatever happens to me, it's not through false pride or humility; nor in the sense that we all deserve what happens to us because we are sinners'

'But what have you done, anyway?' Biondo interrupted him.

'A wicked and a stupid thing, lad. I murmured against one of my superiors because I thought he was unjust.'

Nanni and Biondo, pale in the darkness, looked at one another. 'And so'

The priest was no longer conscious of the sweat that streamed from him. 'You see,' he exclaimed in an agitated voice, 'I want to make it clear that he really was unjust; that the persecution I have suffered was undeserved. I had the right to take up the matter with him, to call in others to help me, to write statements. Then one of two things could happen; either those statements were false, in which case there was nothing to discuss; or they were true, and equally offensive to that authority which, remember, has every right to demand my death. When it commands it is obeyed, and suffers even graver scandals.'

'Now, Biondo, you stay quiet,' the old man began, deep in thought. 'I know it isn't all that easy to make statements in writing, especially when the ecclesiastical courts are concerned. But will you explain to me what the devil's happened here? You came here with a police guard, didn't

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you? In handcuffs! What had that to do with your superiors?’

The priest stared down at the paving stones in the darkness. ‘This is the consequence of every evil action,’ he said softly. ‘Learn from this how every protest can become a fount of evil, every reckless resentment, even in defence of justice itself. I have been banished from my parish, but my people there believed I was right. There have been quarrels, riots in my name, and the blame for them rightly falls upon me, though God knows I would have prevented them if I could.’

‘Riots?’ That was Nanni’s voice.

‘Blood of the Madonna!’ Biondo exclaimed. ‘They fought for you, and you complain?’

Suddenly, beyond the outside door, the barred gate slammed with a resounding clang. In the silence that followed, breathless, voices broke into a confused hubbub close under the window. Someone walked into the passage. The face of the old man, the only one still visible in the gloom, shrank back with a sigh. ‘What’s happening, reverend? They’re leaving us in the dark tonight.’

Nanni said: ‘That’s Ciccia.’

‘Hi, Biondo,’ exclaimed the old man, ‘find out when he’s coming to bring us some water and light the lamp. Remember that shout he gave? I wonder what happened?’

‘Somebody stole his keys, I expect,’ Biondo replied with a grin as he ran to the door.

He started banging on the cell-door and shouting complaints. The outside door creaked and the spy-hole opened, letting in a beam of light. ‘What’s happening in there?’ shouted Ciccia.

‘What’s happening to you? You slam the door in our faces and leave us here in the dark with no water. We’re suffocating in here! Do your job!’

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The outside door slammed. Biondo turned to the others and said: 'There was a smell of fried fish outside by the railings . . . made me long for a café'

The cell-door was unlocked; it swung open, letting in a wave of luminous air, and there was Ciccia with the pitcher. He put it down without a word. He looked worried and depressed; even his moustache was drooping and his eyes were evasive. He turned and went out, refixing the chain. A dim, yellowish light from the ceiling flooded the cell. The prisoners stood looking at one another. Ciccia reappeared. 'Have you got a bed ready for his reverence?' he asked sharply.

'Not yet,' Nanni faltered, standing in the light and looking round for the blankets.

'Then never mind. You come with me, reverend. There's a better bed already made up for you.'

'For me?'

'That's right. You shall sleep in a bunk by yourself. Keeping more than three in here isn't sanitary.'

'Oh, why are you taking him away?' cried the old man. 'We were just getting to know each other.'

'He won't lose anything by getting away from you. Look at that heap of muck!'

'And where the devil do you expect us to put it,' Biondo asked. 'Any room for it in your house?'

'I was waiting for the light,' Nanni said, 'so as to clean up.'

'A cell's come vacant. The assassin's gone off,' Ciccia mumbled.

'Have they betrayed him already?' the old man cried.

'He betrayed himself: he's gone.'

'Dead?' asked the priest.

'Gone, by God! Escaped! Slipped off! Don't make me swear. It's not my fault. God shouldn't allow such things!'

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His eyes glistened and his moustaches quivered. He shot a dirty look at the other three and gave a groan that was almost a belch. The priest, standing lost in thought, opened his mouth to say something when Ciccia interrupted him. 'Come on up. Say goodbye to them tomorrow. These aren't going to escape and I've no time to waste.'

The old man grinned at him without rising from his bed; Nanni watched him without moving; but Biondo followed him to the door. 'Pray that they don't catch that prisoner again tonight, reverend, or you'll have to come back with us. So long!'

'If only they do catch him, I'll stick him in the cellar,' said Ciccia, shutting the door.

'Don't forget the wine,' Biondo chuckled under his breath.

Ciccia was still fumbling at the door of the next cell and peering at the ground. '... They'll haul me up before the Board of Enquiry, and I'll be for it. All they want is somebody to blame. Justice! They ought to be out hunting for the murderer. Instead, they pick on the gaoler. Did I commit the crime? That's the law for you. Is it on our side or the criminal's? That's what I want to know! They give us starvation pay! Just look at these locks! Flimsy cells you can't open or shut properly. They'll put prisoners in a beach-hut, next, you'll see, and still hold us responsible. Men handy with knives, too, and they expect us to control them. Three times I brought him water - couldn't have done more if he'd been my own son - I should have let him split his throat. They'd ruin an honest man just for turning his head a minute. And what good does that do? Murdering, escaping, it's all the same to these chaps, as long as it's against the law.'

The door was open now, but Ciccia still stood there irritably twisting the key in the heavy lock, shooting the

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bolt in and out. 'He'll have gone to look for his own people again,' the priest said, rousing himself to reply.

'The sergeant's there already, waiting for him to get home. But why should he want to go back? A man who'd escape has no fellow-feelings. Wherever he goes he must stay in hiding. He'll take to the woods; he can't escape; and when he's brought back by a troop of *carabinieri* he'll look like a wild animal, famished and scratched to bits. All my peace of mind destroyed for nothing. It's happened before. They'll find out whether it was my fault or not.' He held the door open and added: 'Unless he puts up a fight and they have to shoot him down.'

Against the broken plaster of the wall stood a camp bed with a crumpled, sweat-stained sheet; there was a streak of water on the floor and a pot-bellied pitcher on the stool. The air was lifeless, sultry, oppressive. A little brown loaf left on the pillow looked like a heap of filth.

Ciccio made a lot of noise outside the door, turning the key backwards and forwards several times, but at last he stopped and the sound of his heavy steps died away in the distance. The priest halted in the middle of the cell and shuddered. Slowly he looked around, scrutinising all those objects one by one with the light beating down upon them under the bare walls and the gleaming bars. He went to the bed, lifted the coarse bread with both hands and placed it on the pitcher. He turned back to the bed, leaned one hand on it and sank to his knees. Then he made the sign of the cross, hid his face in his hands and bowed his head down on the edge of the bed.

Rocco clambered up the path between the olive trees that flanked the villa. In the moonlight he could hardly tell the

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trees from their shadows. When he reached the height where the precipitous sea-cliff was concealed by the foliage, Rocco slackened his pace. His eyes widened as he saw the yellow gleam of headlights, and he felt his sweat turn cold in the night air.

He turned and ran down the bank towards the dark house. He fancied he could hear voices laughing in the garden beyond the villa; there was no light in the kitchen or in Concia's room; everyone was out by the gate. Brushing past the clump of black olive trees he turned the corner of the house and peered through the shadowy bushes in the garden. A car stood by the gate, its headlights casting a beam of greater brilliance across the shrubs that shimmered under the moon.

Rocco could distinguish the happy faces of girls and young men dressed in white; one or two boys running about in the light and shouting; and there, standing by the car holding something out to the occupants, was Concia. There was Concia. Rocco leaned back against a tree-trunk, taking deep breaths of the lovely perfume of the garden that had basked in the sun all day.

At last, Concia's employers and their friends were all in the car; the headlights swung over the garden and across the sky; then they were gone. The diminishing sound of the engine echoed in Rocco's ears. Concia, too, seemed to be listening as she stood there. The pale moonlight had resumed its sway over the garden. Suddenly Concia darted back and was on the steps of the villa before Rocco could move into the light. Indeed, he was so absorbed in watching her that he hardly thought of moving, she ran so lightly, holding her head high, never even glancing down at her long legs as they mounted the steps. Now she had vanished.

Hastily, Rocco slipped back through the olive grove behind the villa and came out into the moonlight. Almost

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at once a light was turned on in a room on the ground floor. Rocco leaned against the wall, trembling, hardly managing to refrain from whistling. He was on the point of walking boldly into the kitchen when the door at the back of the room opened and Concia was standing in the doorway, feeling for the switch. 'Don't put on the light, Concia,' said Rocco, leaping forward to seize her in his arms. She jerked herself free with a gasp of terror. Rocco repeated: 'Don't put on the light. You heard me. Come over here.' She resisted as he pulled her to the middle of the kitchen.

'You're hurting me,' she panted.

'I know,' Rocco murmured.

All at once she stopped struggling and let her arm lie limply in his grip. Breathlessly they looked at each other. The profile of Concia's dark head was dimly outlined against the half-light of the outside door. Rocco could guess at her quivering nose, her teeth, her wide frightened eyes. He heard her draw a deep breath that raised her shoulders. His hand gripped her sweaty wrist.

Concia tried to twist herself free, but he was too strong for her. Using his knees and elbows, Rocco pushed her over against the wall near the door. She hit him and he moved back a little, without letting go of her wrist. Concia leaned against him, trying to cling to him, but another thrust of his knee drove her back against the wall.

'Forgive me, Rocco,' she moaned, sliding her free arm round his neck. He made no reply and took hold of her arm to pull it away. Concia raised it and slapped his face. They fought in silence. Rocco hurled her to the wall and jammed her there with the weight of his whole body. Through his flaring nostrils he smelt her strong odour.

Concia gave an ear-splitting shriek. 'Shut up!' panted Rocco, stopping her mouth with his hand. 'Shut up, you harlot. No-one can hear you.' Concia bit his fist and clung

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limply to him once more. 'Quiet!' Rocco said, moving away. 'Quiet, or I'll slit your throat!'

Concia's final scream stopped short in mid-air, and again they stood staring each other in the face, the sudden silence disturbed by their rapid breathing.

'If anyone heard . . .' Rocco stammered.

'D'you think you can frighten me?' Concia whispered, her voice trembling.

'If anyone heard'

Outside the crickets were chirruping and the moon was shining further over the flagstones of the threshold, leaving a deeper shadow across the wall where they stood. Rocco let go Concia's arm and placed himself between her and the door. If anyone did come, one leap would be enough. In the wedge of shadow, the long white strip of shirt between the edges of his coat could be faintly seen, but not his legs or his face.

No one came. Concia, motionless against the wall started hiccuping from nervous tension. Rocco felt a warm drop, like a tear, slipping down his cheek and wiped it away with his hand. It was blood. 'You've scratched me,' he muttered.

Concia gave an uneasy laugh. 'Your own fault,' she said. 'Do they know you're here?'

'Who'd be likely to know that . . . D'you know where I've come from?'

'They told me they'd put you in prison. What have you done? Beaten up somebody?'

Rocco peered into the shadow. 'Come over here, quick,' he said. As Concia moved forward he took her arm and pulled her to the door in the moonlight. Now he could see her dark face, the whites of her eyes and a smile that showed her teeth. Her smile grew more coaxing and she half-closed her eyes. Rocco dropped her arm and took her face between his two hands. He felt the trembling of her

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body, saw her eyes widen; then she looked down and put her arms around his neck, pressing herself against him. His knee pushed her away, but he still held her face in his hands.

'You're falsier than Judas,' he breathed. 'I had to see your face again and know you for what you are. That Genoese friend of yours, I slit his throat for you and you know it . . . D'you think that'll do you any good this time?'

'Kiss me . . . you coward,' Concia moaned, her eyes closed.

With his mouth close against hers, Rocco said again: 'I cut his throat and you know it.' But Concia still clung around his neck and held him close, kissing him, biting him. 'Fool,' she said: 'What a fool you are! Why don't you take me?'

Rocco suddenly seized her by the waist, roughly, like a madman. Concia hung on his neck covering him with kisses, sobbing with emotion. Rocco lifted her in his arms. Blindly, gropingly, he crossed the kitchen, opened the door, bumped into the wall and carried her upstairs. Without a word he flung open the door of her room and they threw themselves on the bed. When Concia stretched out her bare arm to put out the light, then turned on her other side, Rocco sat up in bed and blinked his eyes in the dark. Little by little, through the open window, he could make out the hillside where the olives grew, pale in the moonlight, but the window-sill was black. He moved his leg a little and Concia started up. 'It's late,' he murmured. She said nothing.

Then he jumped out of bed and heard Concia make a movement, quickly suppressed. He leaned over in the darkness, feeling for his trousers on the cold tiled floor. As he slipped them on, his hand discovered a great rent in them between the legs. Quickly he glanced at the bed, where

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Concia lay motionless. He could scarcely see the outline of her body in the gloom. He went over to the window, and knew from her breathing that she had turned her head to follow his movement.

'Stop that,' he said in a fury. 'I know very well you're not asleep.'

Concia gave a long sigh, stirred, then sat up in the darkness. 'I was drowsing, Rocco: what's the matter?' she murmured with a yawn.

'You're more treacherous than a cat, but it's not worth bothering about. Who taught you that trick? Your customers?'

'Why humiliate me so?' Concia whimpered.

Rocco turned to the window. 'Look here,' he said dryly. He held up the knife. 'Take a good look at it. I was going to give it you in the neck. You knew it, too. But it's not worth the trouble. Watch.' He took the point between his fingers and threw it shining high in the air among the olives. He strained his ears to hear it fall, but the leaves were rustling and he could catch no other sound.

Concia had not moved. 'Get dressed, damn you! Cover those breasts. You should be ashamed even to let the air touch them.'

Concia jumped from the bed. 'If they hear you Rocco . . .' Staggering slightly she went to the window, where Rocco was staring down at the ground. Raising her arms as to balance herself, she swung round to look at him then silently moved back to the bed and sat on the edge. 'Rocco,' she murmured, 'why did you want to kill me?' Rocco did not answer, and she went on: 'Wasn't one murder enough for you? You wanted to make it a pair?' Rocco gritted his teeth. 'I'm serious,' she continued. 'First, your things need mending; they'll be all right. But unless

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you come back to bed I won't do them. Answer me. D'you think this house is a cinema show?'

'That'll do, Concia,' Rocco replied in a strangled voice. 'You know I saw you. I saw him too, from the woods, putting on his coat by this window. If it hadn't been for your old mother I'd have climbed up and strangled you then and there.'

'And then you killed this fellow . . . who did you say he was? Sure; men come and put on their jackets by my window, so . . . '

'Concia, it's nothing to laugh at. He told me. I made him spit it out and he boasted . . . '

'And you killed a man, just for that? I never even saw the poor chap, but may God forgive him.' Concia felt over the bed for her dress, held it up in front of her and crossed herself. Rocco's eyes followed the gesture of her pale hand. In a low voice he faltered: 'I forgive him, too. He wasn't to blame. He didn't know you.'

'It's cold, Rocco,' Concia said lightly, slipping on her dress. Barefoot, she walked round the bed tucking in the sheet. Rocco was leaning on the window-sill, the muscles round his heart still quivering. Hesitantly he asked: 'Haven't you something to smoke?'

Concia raised her head. 'Why ever didn't I think of that?' She ran over to a little cabinet and felt inside it. In the light of the match his face looked bewildered and the whites of his eyes shone. She stood for a moment, enjoying the caress of the smoke. Rocco drew back. 'They're foreigners . . . ' he muttered.

'They're from the Civil Engineer's department . . . ' Concia laughed.

'When's the car coming back?'

'Oh, sure! The car. It'll be almost morning when they get

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back, but you must be gone by then. Won't you even let Concia get a little sleep?"

Roughly, Rocco pushed her away and flung the cigarette through the window. 'You know they're hunting me to my death. You know I must go back to prison. And all you feel is fear. Why do you laugh like that?'

The corners of her red mouth dropped. 'I'm not laughing,' she said.

'You're just afraid, and you're keeping me company because you daren't run away. Because you were fooling from the start and you're fooling now! Tonight you've been false to him, too. You're the one who should die.'

Concia gasped and Rocco raised his fist. 'You're laughing, damn you, and in the very room where you seduced us both. One man in prison and another underground. Talk about the cinema! You've been play-acting in this room, always.'

Concia burst into tears, covering her face with her hands.

'Don't whine or choke yourself,' Rocco roared. 'Don't try that on with me. Anyone who really weeps, weeps alone. Tomorrow you'll be back with all the others. But remember, always, that you're the one who killed him.'

'But I love you,' Concia whimpered.

'Don't say such things,' Rocco shouted. 'If the other fellow came back, he'd be the one.'

Concia moved in the darkness and glided gently up to him. Softly she said, without looking up: 'Rocco, stay here . . . in hiding . . . here with me . . .'

Rocco said nothing, but turned his head towards the window. 'Won't you stay with me, Rocco?' she pleaded, clinging to his side, her lips seeking his. He twisted his face away and looked out at the black olives under the cloudless sky.

'The moon has set, now,' she whispered. 'They didn't

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see you climb up here? . . . If you could stay, Rocco . . . we could be together every night, just we two, and you could punish me . . . Don't you want to punish me any more?'

Rocco pushed aside the mouth that sought his cheek, and suddenly Concia reared her head. 'Wretch! Why treat a woman like this? If you don't want me, get out of here! Get out at once! Run away as far as you can, but don't treat me like this just because I'm a servant!' Her shrill voice re-echoed from the trees.

Rocco picked up the jacket he had thrown across the window-sill, and, pushing Concia out of his way, he walked heavily across the room without a word. When he reached the door he looked round to see her white face. He saw her dark outline against the window and knew that she was looking at him in desperation.

'You don't realise how false you are,' he said calmly, and went out into the dark.

5

Ciccio came out into the cold air, looking up with dull eyes. There was nothing to see in heaven or earth, and no-one was coming from the barracks. At that hour even the sea was still, the lucky fishes sleeping peacefully below the surface of the water.

Ciccio went in and switched off the light in the cell. Everyone there was fast asleep. It was already daylight outside the door, and the start of another lovely day. Ciccio carried his seat to the railing and sat down with a sigh. His back was aching and the dawn brought no humidity. He put his head outside the gate, but there was no-one in the street.

He was dozing, when suddenly a voice roused him. It

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was his son, Cicciotto, coming back alone. 'In the woods, nothing. Have any others escaped?' He was laughing, but Ciccia gave him a black look. 'We've been as far as Torre, Dad. But the man in charge of the point there told me that they'll soon catch him. It's only a question of time. If nobody says anything, and they catch him today, the sergeant needn't put in a report. But they've got to find him.'

'Is the sergeant back?'

'It takes six hours just to get up there. If they've found him already, he'll be back this morning. However, the point official told me that he hasn't gone back home, as far as he knows. They'll have to find out who the woman was. Sure enough, that's where he's gone; to hide, or to take it out on her. Unless there's some other girl he knows.'

Ciccia was deep in thought, his moustaches quivering. 'They're strumpets, the whole lot of them, doing such things and keeping it dark. If she were my daughter . . .'

Mopping the sweat from his brow, Cicciotto remarked: 'In my opinion he's still in the neighbourhood and someone's hiding him. The moon was very bright, last night. I was out with Melo and the constables and we inspected everyone in the streets. It was so clear that from Torre we could see the waves breaking on the shore.'

'That's only playing with the job,' Ciccia said. 'You could have done all that by yourself . . .'

'If the sergeant comes back empty-handed, we'll have to send word all along the coast. Then we'll be sure to catch him, even if he's still somewhere handy.'

'Sure, and once La Spezia knows about it, I'll be for it.'

'As long as they catch him, they won't do anything to you, Dad. I suppose he really did go through the door?'

Ciccia muffled a groan. 'It was wide open when I found it, like this gate is now. He'd have been a fool not to walk

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out.' He waved his bunch of keys. 'With the sort of iron-work the governor gives us, you couldn't even keep the garden gate shut, if there were a garden . . .'

'Tell me, Dad, have you got your flask here?' Ciccia looked at him suspiciously. 'No? Never mind. I'll go home and get a meal. But I was saying it would be better, if they do have an enquiry, to hold it somewhere else. They'd say you'd been drinking, that's certain.'

Ciccia sucked the ends of his moustaches and gestured to show he understood. Cicciotto was stamping his feet to shake off the lumps of soil that had stuck to his boots on his way back from the search of the marshes. Suddenly he looked up and said: 'Is it possible he didn't touch the lock? The man at the checkpoint says that everything depends on that, when they hold your enquiry. If he had forced it, they couldn't blame you at all, nor him, either, because the law's always on their side.'

Ciccia opened one eye and gave him a sidelong glance. 'Anyway, show them that lock,' Cicciotto finally advised. Then he stopped by the cell-door and leaned forward. 'Is it shut?' he asked.

'Yes. That priest's in there . . . the one going to the internment camp . . . He'll be gone again by five o'clock. I put him in here because it was empty . . .'

Cicciotto's face grew blank with amazement as he listened. 'Has the sergeant inspected it?'

'Yes . . . No, he only came to the railings. The authorities will inspect it today . . .'

'You should have called me over here last night, Dad. Can't you move that priest out for a minute? I'll go and get an iron bar.'

Awakened so hastily, the priest started up in alarm. He was fully dressed except for his coat. God! what a gaol-bird's beard he had! 'Quick, reverend. You can say your

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prayers later.' Helping him, pushing him, Ciccica took him to the other cell, opened it swiftly and thrust him inside, into the warm dark.

'You already know one another. Stay quiet. It's only for a moment' He locked the door and went back to the other cell. Sure enough, a couple of blows would do it. Why doesn't Cicciotto come back?

He began probing the lock with another key. The lever and the wards moved a little, that was all. He would have to take the lock right off. He put in the proper key, and in two shakes the bolt slid out, solid as iron. It was iron. Not even a sledgehammer would have broken it. He turned the key back and the bolt vanished.

Cicciotto was back now, out of breath and carrying a tool box. His foot slipped in the entrance and the box fell to the ground. 'Quick you slacker! Any minute the *carabinieri* will come for the priest. When's the train?'

Ciccica fumbled a few minutes more, gritting his teeth and breaking a screwdriver. He groaned and kicked the toolbox.

'Give it here, Dad. I'll try.'

'Locks for strong-rooms, that's what they are. Even the man who made them couldn't . . . It's the only money they willingly spend'

'Who's that talking?'

'I've put the priest in with the ice-cream man and the others. It's all right.'

Cicciotto slipped a plain hook into the keyhole and cautiously worked it about, feeling for the spring that worked the mechanism. 'No need to smash it,' he said, his lips barely moving. 'Just so that it doesn't shut, but looks shut. Don't forget that fellow didn't have any hammers. Now . . .' He stopped a moment, pressing gently and half-closing his eyes. 'I think it's giving . . .' he said.

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'Give it here, you good-for-nothing. Let's break it. It only means he must have had a nail in his pocket and the sergeant overlooked it. I'm not obliged to hang around here all day. He'll have broken it while I was out.'

'Suppose he had filled up the hole in the wall where the bolt slides in? You turned the key and thought the door was locked, but it wasn't.'

'You don't know what prison's like, you don't. When d'you think he could have filled the hole? The bolt was in it, all the time he was in here.'

'Got it!' Ciccio exclaimed, still bending over the lock, working on it. 'I felt the spring give. Bring the hammer.'

Ciccio swung the hammer round his neck and Ciccio stretched out his hand to grasp it. Then he dealt a heavy blow on the screwdriver he had wedged in the keyhole. The screwdriver dropped to the ground.

'Fool! The point is still inside.'

'What's the odds?' said Ciccio, straightening up. 'Try the key.'

In fear and trembling, Ciccio put in the key and turned it while they both stood silent. He tried it this way and that, but nothing moved. Then something jingled inside the case but the bolt no longer came out. He wiped away his sweat. 'Now they can come,' he said in a fury. 'That's O.K.'

'The best of it is, they can't put it on his charge sheet. It's agreed he meant to escape. They'd charge you with it, though, if they knew you'd broken the spring.'

'I didn't break anything! What did I break? . . . It was you, you fool. Take away that toolbox.'

Ciccio tried the key again, the tip of his tongue between his teeth, then he picked up the tools and went off. Ciccio turned the key again, standing in the doorway. The door remained unlocked. No-one would ever have noticed it, naturally. Twirling his moustaches in high good humour he

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went to the other cell and lowered the shutter covering the peephole. Inside a voice was speaking slowly. Ciccio leaned down and called: 'Hold yourself in readiness, reverend. Any minute now, you'll be off.' Then he closed the peephole.

Cicciotto reappeared on the front step. 'The *carabinieri* are coming, Dad,' he said, then ran off, bent double to avoid being seen. Ciccio gazed round unconcernedly at the open door and the cool pavement. He heard footsteps; saw men in heavy boots and thick uniforms of black and red, their berets worn aslant. 'Up and about already, you chaps?' he greeted them.

That stocky fellow with a hair-brush moustache still had his eyes shut. He tipped his beret with a flick of his finger and gave a sour smile. 'D'you have fun and games like this every night?' he asked irritably. 'We were lucky to stay in barracks. The police chief even wanted us to turn out! Us! That 'ud be a laugh! We're *carabinieri*. We don't belong to the regular force.'

The second man stood waiting by the main door. Ciccio looked back as he went towards the cell and asked: 'No-one's come back yet?'

He tried to look disappointed about it as he selected the key. 'There are exceptional cases,' he remarked. 'Tisn't every man who can force a door. Had a bathe this morning?'

'In sweat,' grumbled the man in charge, running his hand round inside his collar. 'It's a wretched beach. More pebbles than water.'

'Full of mosquitoes and loose women,' added the surly fellow by the door.

'Hand over that priest, will you?' said the little man impatiently. 'We mustn't miss the train.'

Ciccio unlocked the cell-door and called the priest.

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Biondo and Nanni crowded round him, saying goodbye. Biondo shook him by the hand, crying: 'Good luck, reverend. Don't forget us prisoners,' as the priest came out backwards.

'Be quick!' Ciccia urged. 'Get back, you others.' He pushed Nanni inside and shut the door. There was a sound of tramping feet, then silence. While Ciccia was filling up the exit permit, the priest folded his hands in prayer, then went over to the first guard. The second one at the gate came closer too.

'Is there any news of the young fellow who escaped?'

'Not yet, reverend. It's a question of time. He's not one who'd get by because of his honest face. If he does get clear, though, and commit any more stupid crimes, our friend the door-keeper here will be in trouble . . .'

Ciccia raised his head. 'When a man's done his duty . . .'

'You call it doing your duty, letting him escape?' said the *carabiniere* dryly.

Ciccia lost the thread of his thought. He saw the other *carabiniere*, the solemn-faced one, start to grin, so he bent his head again and swallowed what he meant to say. The priest stood quietly in the middle of the room, his coat unbuttoned, his loose heavy trousers sagging over his shoes.

'D'you feel refreshed, now, reverend?' asked the first *carabiniere*. 'Then excuse me . . .' He turned to his companion who came forward, fumbling in the pouch slung round his shoulder.

Ciccia watched the priest's hands extended, crossed and wedged under the teeth of the hand-cuffs. The officer's swift fingers made sure the wrists were firmly gripped, then he clicked the padlock shut. The priest raised his head again. 'Regulations,' said the one with the moustache, thrusting out his lower lip. 'Ah! Your cap. Where is it?' He found

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the cap crumpled on a stool and put it on the priest's head himself.

Ciccio stood up and offered his pen to the *carabiniere*. While he was signing, there came the sound of a car stopping outside. 'At least they're punctual round here,' he muttered. 'Well, then, look after yourself; take a tip from me; in a pub, leave after the last round, not the first.'

They went out. The car moved off. From the doorstep, Ciccio watched the flowery slopes above the wall brightening to gold in the warm light. The new day was beginning with doors banging, children crying, voices calling to one another. The rattle of a cart made the air quiver. There was nobody about.

Ciccio went back in, fastened the gate and wandered slowly off to the cupboard. Stealthily he opened it and took out the flask, clearing his throat.

The musty smell of yesterday's wine was still clinging to the dirty glass. He poured and drank slowly, looking up now and then. He heard someone banging on the railings. Against the light he did not at once recognise the fugitive who stood there with his jacket over his shoulders, staring into the room. Then, stupefied with shock, he dropped the glass. But all the other said was: 'You can go on drinking. I know the way.'

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There are days when the city where I live wakes in the morning with a strange look. The people in the streets, the traffic, the trees – everything seems familiar but as if seen with new eyes, like those moments when one looks in the mirror and asks oneself: ‘Who is that man?’ For me, those are the only days in the whole year that I really enjoy.

On such mornings I get away from the office a little early, if I can, and go down into the streets to mix with the crowd, staring unreservedly at everyone who goes by. One or two of them, I imagine, may stare at me in the same way, for in moments like this I really do feel a self-confidence that makes me quite a different man.

I am convinced that never in my whole life shall I have anything more precious than the revelation of how I can derive pleasure from these moments. One way of prolonging them that I have sometimes found successful is to sit in a modern-style café with wide, clear windows, and from that vantage point to savour the bustle on the pavements and in the streets, the whirl of colour, the babble of voices, and the inner calm that controls all this movement.

For some years, now, I have suffered from delusions and the bitterest remorse, yet I can affirm that my dearest wish is only for this peace, this serenity. I am not made for

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storms and struggles: and if, on certain mornings, I go down full of zest for a walk around the streets, and my past seems a perfidy, I repeat that I ask nothing more of life than being allowed to watch.

Yet even this simple pleasure sometimes leaves me with the bitter after-taste one normally associates with a drug. Long ago I realised how essential astuteness is to living, and before being astute with others one must be astute with oneself. I envy those people who, before doing something wicked or grossly unfair, or even merely satisfying a selfish whim, manage to pre-arrange a chain of circumstances to make their action seem justifiable, even to their own consciences. Women are especially clever at this. I have no great vices, (unless, indeed, my timorous shrinking from life's battle and my quest for serenity in solitude are the worst vices of all) but nevertheless I know how to be astute with myself and keep my self-control when I enjoy what little pleasure life allows me.

Sometimes I actually stop short in the street, look around me and wonder what right I have to enjoy such self-confidence. This frequently happens when I go out more often than usual. Not that I steal the time from my work; I maintain myself decently and support my niece at boarding school. (She is alone in the world and passes for my niece, but the old woman who calls herself my mother will not have her in the house). What I wonder is whether I am not being ridiculous when I stroll about so blissfully, staring at people; ridiculous and offensive. I sometimes think such pleasure is more than I deserve.

Or else, as happened the other morning, I may be sitting in a café and find myself watching some intriguing scene that first attracts my attention because the people taking part in it are so normal. Such an incident is quite enough to make me relapse into a guilt-stricken sense of loneliness,

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a prey to so many desolate memories. The more they recede into the past, the more does their unchanging life reveal their subtle, terrifying significance.

I watched five minutes of byplay between the young girl at the cash-desk and a customer in a light-coloured overcoat, who had a friend with him. The young man explained that the cashier owed him change from a hundred *lire* note. He banged on the desk, pretending to search his wallet and pockets. 'That's not the way to treat clients, my girl,' he said, winking at his embarrassed friend. The girl laughed, and the fellow invented a tale of the trips they would have taken together, with that hundred *lire*, up and down in the lift at the public convenience. With muffled bursts of laughter, they decided they would deposit those few *soldi* at the bank – when they got them.

'Goodbye, my girl,' he called as he finally went out. 'Think of me tonight.' The cashier, laughing and excited, said to the waitress: 'What a man!'

I had noticed that cashier on other mornings, and sometimes I smiled without looking at her, in a moment of forgetfulness. But my peace of mind is too fleeting; based on nothing. My customary remorse comes over me.

We are all dirty-minded in that way, but some of us can be genial about it, smiling and making others smile. Others keep it to themselves, letting it create a void inside them. After all, the first way is not so stupid as the second.

It is on mornings like this that I am surprised by the thought – and every time it strikes me afresh – that all I am really guilty of in life is stupidity. Others perhaps can do something wicked deliberately, with complete self-assurance, interesting themselves in their victim and in the game – and I suspect that a life spent in that way may give a great deal of satisfaction; as for me, all I have ever done is to suffer from a vast, inept lack of confidence, and to

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react against other people, when I come into contact with them, with stupid cruelty. That is why – and there's no remedy for it – it only needs a few moments of remorse and loneliness to overcome me, and my thoughts go back to Carlotta.

It's more than a year since she died, and by now I know all the ways in which the memory of her can take me by surprise. If I want to, I can even recognise the state of mind that initiates her reappearance and with a great effort distract myself. But I do not always want to. Even now, that remorse offers me dark angles to explore, new points that I scrutinize with the same anxiety and terror that I felt a year ago. I have been so true to her in my tortuous fashion that every one of those far-off days appears to my memory not as something fixed and unchangeable, but as an elusive impression that is to me as real as today.

Not that Carlotta had any mystery about her. She was, on the contrary, one of those women who are too simple, poor things, and grow worried if, for a moment, they stop being absolutely sincere and attempt a subterfuge or a touch of coquetry. But since they are simple, no-one notices them. I have never understood how she could bear to earn her living working at a cash desk. She would have made an ideal sister.

What I still haven't fathomed, even today, is the way I felt about her, the restraint I had then. What, for instance, can I say about the evening when Carlotta had put on a velvet dress – an old one – to receive me in her little two-roomed apartment? I said I would have preferred her in a bathing costume. It was one of the first times I had called on her and I hadn't even kissed her yet.

However, Carlotta gave me a timid smile, went off into the other room and reappeared – incredibly – in a bathing costume. That was the evening when I kissed her for the

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first time and threw her down on the divan, but as soon as our lovemaking was finished I told her I always preferred to be alone afterwards and I went away. For three days I did not let her set eyes on me, and when I went back I addressed her formally in the third person.

So began a ridiculous love-affair, made up of timid confidences on her part and an occasional word or two on mine. Once, without thinking, I used the intimate '*tu*' as I spoke to her, but Carlotta did not respond. Then I asked if she had made it up with her husband. Carlotta answered tearfully, 'He never treated me the way you do.'

It was easy to make her lean her head on my breast while I caressed her and told her I loved her. Lonely as I was, why shouldn't I make love to that quasi-widow? And Carlotta gave in, softly confessing that she'd loved me from the first moment and thought I was an extraordinary man, but I had caused her a lot of unhappiness in the short time we had known each other; she didn't know why, but all the men treated her like that.

'When one is hot and one is cold,' I smiled with my lips in her hair, 'love will last.'

Carlotta was pale; her enormous eyes often looked tired and strained. Her body was pale, too. That night, in the darkness of her room, she asked me if I had left her, that other time, because her body did not please me.

But I had no pity on her this time, either, and in the middle of the night I dressed myself and told her, without offering any excuses, that I had to get moving and go out. Carlotta wanted to go with me. 'No,' I said. 'I like to be alone,' and I left her with a kiss.

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2

When I knew Carlotta, I was just recovering from a bitter blow that almost cost me my life; and I felt a grim amusement in going back through the deserted streets, fleeing from the one who loved me. It had so long been my lot to spend my nights and days humiliated and infuriated by a woman's caprice.

I am convinced, now, that no passion is powerful enough to change a man's true nature. Even the fear of death cannot alter his fundamental characteristics. Once the climax of passion is over one becomes again what one was before – honest man or rogue, father of a family or a mere boy – and lives one's own daily life. Or, rather, in the crisis one sees one's own true nature. It horrifies us, and normality disgusts us. The insult to us is so atrocious that we would rather be dead, but there is no-one to accuse us except ourselves. It is to that woman that I owe my present condition, reduced to a daily job with no scope and no hope of forging a closer link with the world at large, disliked by the next man, disliked by my mother whom I support, and by my 'niece' whom I do not love. I owe it all to her. But would things have turned out differently with any other woman? Another, I mean, who would be capable of humiliating me as my nature demands?

Anyway, that was the thought that came to me whenever I had done something wrong, something that woman I loved could call faithless, and it gave me some comfort. At a certain stage of suffering we inevitably think we are suffering unjustly; it is a natural anaesthetic; it restores our energies, makes life as entertaining as we could possibly wish, fills us with a sense of our own importance in the face of things in general, flatters us. I have experienced it, and I could have wished that the injustice, the ingratitude, had

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been even more flagrant. In those long days and nights of anguish, I was conscious of a vague, secret awareness, like an atmosphere or a radiation. I remember my stunned amazement that it could have happened; that that woman was only a woman after all; that the delirium, the agony, the sighs, words, actions, even I myself, could all have turned out as they did.

So, having been treated unjustly, I revenged myself, not on the guilty one but on another woman, as happens in this world.

When I left Carlotta's apartment at night, after indulging my passion to the full, my mind was at ease. It pleased me to wander about by myself, feeling free to enjoy walking down that long avenue, vaguely recalling the sensations and the thoughts of my youth. I have always loved the simple pattern of the night. Street lamps alternating with zones of darkness evoke my most cherished flights of fancy, colouring and heightening them by the contrasts they present. Here I could give free play to the dull resentment I felt towards Carlotta because of her meekness and her lust, unhampered by the restraint I imposed on such thoughts, out of pity, while I was actually with her.

But I was no longer young. I tried to cut myself loose from Carlotta by reviewing in detail her body and her caresses, dispassionately. It seemed to me that, separated from her husband as she was, still young and childless, she might well fancy she had the right to turn to me as a refuge. But, poor girl, as a lover she was too naive. Perhaps that was really why her husband was false to her.

I remember one evening when we were strolling arm in arm through the streets in the dusk on our way back from the cinema. Carlotta said: 'I'm so happy. It's nice to go to the cinema with you.'

'Did you ever go with your husband?'

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Carlotta smiled: 'Are you jealous?'

I shrugged. 'What difference does it make?'

'I'm tired,' she said, clinging to my arm. 'This useless chain that binds us is ruining my life and his, too, and compels me to bear a name that has done me nothing but harm. It should be possible to get a divorce, at least when there are no children.'

I felt affectionate that evening, from our long, warm contact and my rising desire. 'Have you any scruples about it?' I asked.

'Oh, my dear,' Carlotta sighed. 'Why aren't you always as nice as you are tonight? Think... If I could get a divorce...'

I said nothing. At one time, when she spoke to me of divorce I was shattered and exclaimed: 'Please yourself. You're the best judge of that. Do what you like, and I'll bet you'll be awarded alimony, too, if it's true that he was unfaithful to you.'

'I have never wanted anything,' Carlotta replied. 'Since that day I've been working,' and she looked at me. 'Now I've got you, I should think that I wasn't being fair to you if I took money from him.'

That evening after the cinema, I closed her mouth with a kiss. Then I took her to the station café and gave her a couple of drinks. In the dim light from the windows we sat in a corner like a pair of lovers. I had several drinks myself and said to her, out loud, 'Carlotta, let's get ourselves a child, tonight, shall we?'

People glanced at us as Carlotta, laughing and blushing, put her hand over my mouth.

I talked and talked. Carlotta spoke about the film, saying all sorts of silly things, passionately comparing us to the characters in the drama. I went on drinking, knowing that was the only way to make me feel loving towards Carlotta.

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The cold air outside revived us and we ran to her home. I stayed with her all that night, and when I woke in the morning I felt her beside me, rumpled and drowsy. She stretched out her arms to embrace me and I did not repulse her. When I got up, though, my head was aching. I felt irritated by Carlotta's air of happiness as she prepared coffee for me, humming to herself. We both had to go out, but remembering the concierge she sent me on first, after kissing and hugging me behind the door.

My most vivid recollection of that awakening is of the trees in the street outside, their boughs stiff and dripping in the fog beyond the bedroom curtains. After all that warmth and affection inside, the keen air waiting for me out of doors stimulated my blood; only I would have rather stayed by myself, smoking and thinking, conjuring up a very different awakening and a different companion.

On these occasions Carlotta drew from me a tenderness that I reproached myself for, the moment I was alone again. I spent frenzied moments trying to purge my mind and free myself from even the faintest memory of her. Again I promised myself to be firmer, harsher, a promise I kept only too well. It must be clear that we made love out of boredom, lust, for any reason except the only one she tried to delude herself existed. It irritated me to recall her serene, blissful look after love-making. It made me furious to see it on her face, while the only woman from whom I wanted it had never given it to me.

'If you take me as I am, all right,' I told her once. 'but get it out of your head that you can be part of my life.'

'Don't you love me?' Carlotta faltered.

'The little love I was capable of, I burned up when I was young.'

But sometimes I grew angry at having admitted, out of shame or lust, that I loved her at all.

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Carlotta tried to smile: 'We are good friends, at least?'

'Listen,' I told her seriously, 'that sort of nonsense makes me sick: we are a man and a woman who bore each other, but we get on all right in bed . . .'

'Oh, that, yes!' she cried, clutching my arm and hiding her face. 'I like it, I like it!'

' . . . and there's no more to it than that.'

One such conversation, in which it seemed to me I had been weak, was enough to make me avoid her. If she telephoned me at the office from her café, I replied that I was busy. The first time this happened, Carlotta tried to take offence. Then I made her spend an evening of anguish by sitting coldly beside her on the divan. The shaded table lamp threw a white light over her knees, and from where I sat in the shadow I could feel the barely restrained passion of her glances. The tension was almost unbearable, and I myself broke it by remarking: 'You should thank me, Signora: you will remember this session, perhaps more than many others.'

Carlotta did not move, and I went on: 'You'd like to murder me, Signora? Why not? But if you think you can act the lady with me, you're wasting your time. As for whims and fancies, I can produce those for myself.' Carlotta was panting. 'Not even a bathing costume,' I told her, 'will be any use to you tonight.'

Carlotta leapt in front of me and I saw her dark head flash through the white light like a missile. I threw out my hands to ward her off, but she collapsed at my knees, weeping. I patted her on the head two or three times and rose to my feet. 'I ought to cry, too, Carlotta, but I know it's no use. All you are feeling now, I've felt myself. I wanted to kill myself, but I lacked the courage. Here's the joke: one who is weak enough to think of suicide is too weak to do it . . . So get up, Carlotta, you'll be all right.'

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'Don't treat me like this,' she sobbed.

'I'm not hurting you. And you know I like to be alone. If you let me go off by myself, I come back. Otherwise we shan't see each other again. Listen! Would you like me to love you?' She looked up, her face transfigured. 'Then stop loving me. There's no other way. "It's the hare that makes the hunter".'

Scenes like that shook Carlotta to her very roots, so much so that she thought of leaving me. (After all, didn't they show that our temperaments were basically similar?) Carlotta was fundamentally simple – too simple. She was incapable of realising this clearly, but certainly she felt it. She tried – poor, hapless creature – to mollify me by treating it lightly. 'Such is life,' she would say sometimes, and 'Poor little me.'

If she had thrown me over then, and stuck to it, I think I should have felt a little hurt. But Carlotta could not reject me. If I missed two evenings in a row, I found her with swollen eyes; and if sometimes, out of pity or tenderness, I stopped at the café and asked her to come out, she would jump up eagerly, confused and blushing, even pretty.

My bitterness did not trouble her; what did hurt her was any restraint, any resentment, that our intimacy tended to create in me. Since I did not love her, it seemed to me monstrous that she should have even the slightest claim on me. There were days when it made me shudder to address her as an intimate friend, an equal. I felt degraded. What was this woman to me, that she should take my arm?

To offset that mood, there were days when I felt reborn; times when I could leave work and walk in the fresh sunlight through the shining streets, free of her and of anything else, my body satisfied, my old griefs lulled to rest, eager to see, to savour, to feel as I did when I was young. The fact that Carlotta was suffering for love of me softened

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and alleviated my own by-gone sorrows, made me feel rather remote from them and from the mocking world. Away from her I found myself again, unharmed and more experienced. She was the sponge that had wiped me clean again. I often thought of her.

3

Some evenings when I talked and talked, absorbed in the game, I forgot my bitterness and became a boy again.

‘Carlotta,’ I would say. ‘How are you off for lovers? It’s a long time since I’ve been one of them, but, after all, that’s the best way. If all goes well, one enjoys it; if badly, one hopes for better luck next time. They taught me to live a day at a time. How does that suit you, Carlotta?’ She laughed and shook her head. ‘And then,’ I went on ‘they inspire such fine thoughts! The man we love – who couldn’t care less – will never be as happy as we are. Unless . . .’, and I smiled, ‘he goes to bed with some other woman and gets his own back that way.’ Carlotta frowned. ‘Love’s a fine thing,’ I concluded, ‘and nobody can escape it.’

Carlotta served me as an audience. I talked on my own account, on those evenings, the best kind of talk. ‘There’s love,’ I said, ‘and there’s betrayal. To enjoy love to the full, it must also be a betrayal. That’s a thing boys do not understand. You women learn it more quickly. Did you betray your husband?’ Carlotta blushed and tried to smile.

‘We boys were more stupid. We fell nobly in love with an actress or a girl-friend and devoted all our finest thoughts to her. Only we forgot to tell her about them. As far as I know, every girl of our age was already well aware that love is a problem of astuteness. It seems impossible, but boys go to the licensed brothels and conclude from that

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that the women outside are different. What did you do when you were sixteen, Carlotta?’

But Carlotta was thinking on different lines. Before she said a word, her eyes told me that I belonged to her. I hated the firm, possessive care for me that radiated from the look she gave me.

‘What were you doing at sixteen?’ I repeated, looking at the ground.

‘Nothing,’ she replied gravely. I knew what she was thinking.

Then she asked my pardon, called herself a poor little thing, said she realised she had no right, but the gleam in her eyes was enough for me. ‘You’re stupid, you know,’ I told her. ‘As far as I’m concerned, your husband could have you back,’ and I went away feeling relieved.

The next day but one, she phoned me timidly at the office and I replied curtly. In the evening we saw each other again.

Carlotta was amused when I told her about my school-girl niece, and shook her head incredulously when I said I would rather have sent my mother away to school and lived with the child. She imagined us as two beings living apart, pretending to be uncle and niece, but in reality sharing a whole world of absorbing secrets. She asked me scornfully if the girl wasn’t really my daughter.

‘Of course. She was born when I was sixteen. And she would be blonde, just to spite me. How can one manage to be born blonde? To me, fair-haired people are just animals, like monkeys or lions, as if they were always in the sun.’

Carlotta remarked: ‘I was blonde, as a baby.’

‘I was bald,’ I replied.

In those last days I grew mildly curious about Carlotta’s past, sometimes forgetting what she had already told me. I scanned her as one scans the gossip columns in the daily

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papers. I amused myself by puzzling her, asking her cruel questions and answering them myself. In reality, I was just listening to my own voice.

But Carlotta had understood me. 'Tell me about yourself,' she would say on some evenings, squeezing my arm. She knew that to make me talk about myself was the only way of keeping me as her friend.

'Have I ever told you, Carlotta,' I said to her one night, 'that a man killed himself because of me?' She looked at me, half smiling, half dismayed.

'It's nothing much to laugh at,' I went on. 'We died together, but he stayed that way. The dreams of youth . . .' (That's strange, I thought. I've never told anyone about it; and now I'm telling Carlotta.) 'He was a friend of mine, a fine, fair-haired chap. He really did look like a lion. You girls never make friendships like that. You're already too jealous, even at that age. We went to school together, and always saw each other in the evenings. We talked filth, as boys do, but we were both in love with a lady. She must be living still. She was our first love, Carlotta. We spent our evening discussing love and death. No lover has ever been more certain of being understood by his friend than we were. Jean – that was his name – had a haughty sadness that put me to shame. All by himself he created the melancholy that pervaded those evenings we spent walking round in the fog. We had never believed one could suffer so much . . .'

'Were you in love with her, too?'

'Jean was more unhappy than I was, and that troubled me. In the end I had the idea that we could kill ourselves and I told him about it. He thought it was a fine plan – he who was usually just a dreamer. We had only one revolver and we went into the hills to try it out in case it wouldn't work. Jean was the one who fired it. He had always been

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the leader in any adventure – indeed, I believe that if he hadn't fallen in love with that beautiful girl, I shouldn't have done so, either. We fired the gun – it was winter-time, and we were in a deserted lane half-way up the hillside – and I was still dazed by the violence of the explosion when Jean put the barrel into his mouth and said: "This is how they do it!" The gun went off and killed him.' Carlotta stared at me, shocked and terrified. 'I did not know what to do,' I said, 'and I ran away.'

That evening Carlotta asked me: 'Did you really love that woman?'

'What woman? I loved Jean. I've already told you so.'

'And did you feel like killing yourself, too?'

'Sure, I did. It would have been a silly thing to do, but it was terribly cowardly not to. I wish I had, sometimes.'

Carlotta often recalled that story and talked to me about Jean as if she had known him. She made me describe him and asked me what I was like then. 'Did you keep the revolver? Not to kill yourself, you know. Haven't you ever thought of killing yourself since?' She looked keenly at me as she spoke.

'Every time a man is in love he thinks of it.'

Carlotta did not even smile. 'D'you still think of it?'

'I think about Jean, sometimes.'

4

Carlotta put me to a lot of trouble at lunch-times. Going to and from my office I had to pass the windows of her café, and hide myself to avoid having to go in and cheer her up a bit. I did not go home at mid-day and I was only too glad to spend that little hour alone in some restaurant or other, smoking with my eyes half shut. Now and then I

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caught a glimpse of Carlotta perched on her stool, mechanically tearing off counterfoils, nodding, smiling or frowning, sometimes sharing a joke with a customer.

She was there from seven in the morning until four in the afternoon. She wore blue. They paid her four hundred and eighty *lire* a month, and Carlotta was quite happy to spend it all at once. For lunch she had a glass of milk, without leaving her desk. The job would have been easy enough, she used to tell me, if it hadn't been for the slamming of the door every time customers came in or went out. There were times when she felt it was battering on her brain.

After that, I shut the door carefully when I went into the café. When she was with me, Carlotta would try to describe to me those little scenes with the customers, but she couldn't manage to talk as I did, just as she failed to shock me with her suggestive hints about offers made to her by some lecherous old man or other.

'Get off with anybody you like,' I told her, 'only make sure I don't see him. Entertain him on the odd days. And watch out for V.D.'

Carlotta gave a wry grimace. For some days she had had something on her mind. 'In love again, Carlotta?' I asked her one evening, and she looked at me like a whipped dog. I began to lose patience with her, as I had before. The way her eyes shone in the darkness of her little room, the way she kept squeezing my hand, made me burn with anger. I was always afraid of getting too involved with her. I hated the very thought of it.

I grew sullen and boorish. But Carlotta no longer accepted my outbursts of bad temper with the submissive distress she used to show. She would stay quietly watching me, and sometimes she would gently withdraw from the caress I tried to give her to show I was sorry.

That pleased me even less. I found it repugnant to have

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to court her before I could possess her. The change did not come about suddenly, though. Carlotta would say: 'I've got a headache . . . That door! Let's be good tonight. Talk to me.'

When I realised that Carlotta was doing it intentionally, feeling humiliated and dredging up pangs of remorse, I stopped having those violent outbursts. I simply played her false. I started seeing again a woman I had known before, on those dreary evenings when, after visiting a brothel, I would sit and rest in some wretched café, feeling neither happy nor sad, just dazed. To me that seemed fair enough: either one accepts love with all its hazards or turns to the only other thing left – prostitution.

I thought Carlotta was pretending to be jealous and I laughed at her. She suffered, but she was too simple to turn her grief to good account. Instead, as happens to anyone who genuinely suffers, she lost her good looks. I was sorry about that, but I felt I should have to leave her.

Carlotta saw the blow coming. One night when we were in bed and I instinctively avoided any conversation, she suddenly pushed me away and curled herself up against the wall.

'What's the matter?' I asked crossly.

'If I were to disappear tomorrow,' she said, suddenly turning round, 'would it matter at all to you?'

'I don't know,' I stammered.

'And if I betrayed you?'

'All life is a betrayal.'

'And if I went back to my husband?' She meant what she said. I shrugged my shoulders. 'I am a poor woman,' she went on, 'and I'm incapable of betraying you. I've seen my husband.'

'How?'

'He came to the café.'

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'Didn't he skip off to Algeria, then?'

'I don't know,' Carlotta replied. 'I saw him at the café.'

Perhaps she didn't mean to tell me, but it slipped out that her husband was with a woman in a fur coat. 'Then you didn't get a chance to talk?' I asked.

Carlotta hesitated: 'He came back the next day but one. He talked to me and brought me home.'

I must admit I felt uneasy. 'Here?' I asked softly.

Carlotta clung to me with her whole body. 'But I love you,' she murmured. 'Don't imagine . . .'

'Here?' I said again.

'It was nothing, dear. He talked to me about his business. Only, seeing him again, I realised how much I love you, and I wouldn't go back to him no matter how much he begged me.'

'He did beg you, then?'

'No, but he told me that if he had to marry again, he'd marry me.'

'Have you seen him since?'

'He came back to the café with that woman . . .'

That was the last time I spent the night with Carlotta. Without saying goodbye to her, without regrets, I stopped running after her or meeting her at home. I left it to her to telephone me and wait for me in the café, not every evening, but now and then. Carlotta came every time, devouring me with her eyes. Her voice trembled as we parted.

'I've never seen him since,' she whispered one evening.

'You're doing the wrong thing,' I replied. 'You ought to try and get him back.'

It irritated me that she regretted leaving her husband, as beyond all doubt she did. It also annoyed me that she had hoped to bind me closer to her by talking like that. Such futile love was not worth Carlotta's remorse or my own risk.

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One evening I phoned her to say I would drop in and see her. She seemed incredulous and uneasy as she opened the door to me. I looked around apprehensively. She was wearing her velvet dress. I remember she had a cold and kept pulling at her handkerchief, dabbing her red nose.

I saw at once that she understood. She was quiet and docile, responding to all I said with timid glances. She let me go on talking, watching me furtively over her handkerchief. Then she stood up, came over to me and leaned against my face; I had to kiss her.

'Aren't you coming to bed?' she whispered in her usual voice.

I went to bed, and all the time I found her face objectionable, damp and inflamed as it was from her cold. At midnight I jumped out of bed and started dressing. Carlotta switched on the light and looked at me a moment. Then she put it out and said to me: 'All right then, go.' Puzzled and embarrassed, I stumbled out.

For days after that, I feared a telephone call, but nothing disturbed me. Week after week I worked in peace. Then one evening I was seized with desire for Carlotta, but shame helped me to withstand it. Yet I knew that if I had knocked on her door, I should have brought happiness. That certainty I have always had.

I did not yield, but a day or two later I passed in front of her café. There was a blonde at the cash-desk. She must have changed her hours. But I didn't see her in the evening, either. I thought she might be ill, or that her husband had taken her back. That idea displeased me.

But my legs shook under me when the concierge at the street door stared at me with her hard eyes and told me bluntly that a month ago they had found her dead in bed, with the gas turned on.

The Villa on the Hill

Once again I climbed the road up the hill. As in the old days, every turn in the steep ascent revealed a fresh sweep of green slopes and old walls rising higher and higher, but now these scarcely seemed real to me. I had lived far away from them for so long, hardly ever thinking of them except in a momentary day-dream, that their actual physical existence meant no more to me than a symbol of the past.

But the evening breeze and the smell of the earth, these were no symbols. In them I rediscovered the very atmosphere of my youth. I had never forgotten them. So many times, in distant lands or city streets, a breath of air had brought back to me the savour of other days.

The voice on the telephone was not a symbol, either. It had made me jump, it sounded so clearly in my ear, so exactly as I remembered it. Probably Ginia had changed more than her voice. Our voices and the smell of our bodies change less than anything else about us. But I shouldn't, I think, have recognised Ginia by her smell or even by her perfume.

I paused by a railing that had not been there in my day, trying to recapture the old feeling of adventure by looking down at the swift little torrent. How often my wandering

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footsteps had been halted by its chill breath. Suddenly, with a flurry of stones, a fair-haired young fellow with his coat slung over his shoulder emerged from the half-dried river bed and clambered up to the level of the road. Instinctively I stepped back politely as he swung his legs over the railing and jumped down. Barely glancing at me he gave an off-hand smile as if his thoughts were far away. 'Good evening,' I remarked, casually.

'Good evening,' he hastily replied, then bent his head and hurried on up the road. He disappeared past the first corner and I thought no more about him. I looked around me, trying to recognise the place. From what I remembered of the hill, and from my calculations of the house numbers, I still had a long way to go, past the inn where the lime trees grew, and the great deserted park where in June wild strawberries appeared amongst the thick grass. Whatever gave Ginia the idea of coming to live up here? I wondered if she still remembered how greedily we used to gobble up that fruit, or was she too grown-up for that, now?

My mind was dominated by the thought of seeing her again, but I was quite at ease. I am one of those men who enjoy solitude, especially when I know I won't have to endure it for long, and, alone as I was on that road of the past, my memories swarmed about me. Was I really that boy of long ago? Whom would I meet, that evening? I looked at the torrent and the railings of the scattered villas; and as I walked along the asphalt road I seemed to be trampling down a secret sadness, almost a presentiment. But only the dark outlines of the ancient trees were melancholy, not the breeze or the solitude.

So I came to another bend in the road and saw in the distance the same young fellow I had seen earlier, perched on a low wall. There he sat, smoking a cigarette and looking at the sky, clear with the onset of dusk. As I drew

The Villa on the Hill

nearer I had the impression that he was extraordinarily young for his lanky height. He had one foot on the ground and the other on the wall.

When I asked if he could direct me to the villa, he removed his cigarette and pointed to a fence only a few yards away. 'I'm going there, too. It's just here.'

The gate was close by, revealing a steep, narrow flight of steps that led up to a flower-filled terrace. The red roof of the villa could be seen through the trees, and from somewhere in that direction came the chatter of people enjoying a party.

The boy had not moved. He still sat there, smoking and looking at the sky. I don't know why, but I stood waiting for him by the gate. Slowly he finished his cigarette, then jumped to his feet and with a smile followed me through the little gateway.

'One can't be alone for a moment,' said Ginia, taking me on to the terrace and shutting the door with her shoulder. There was a gleaming table, set for seven or eight guests, and in the cool evening it gathered to itself all the light in the sky. 'It's like being on a lake,' I remarked. Ginia threw herself down on a garden seat and tenderly looked me up and down. From below came the sound of voices and a crunching of gravel.

We talked at great length, eagerly. I was aware of a sadness in Ginia that I could not fathom, and I fell silent, devoting myself to watching her. She was still the same. Her strong face was marked by her first wrinkles, but they had not lessened her beauty. At last she smiled and glanced around. 'They're looking for me, down there,' she said.

'Has your husband arrived?'

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Genia smiled again. 'Not he! He knows we have a lot of things to talk about.'

'We should never finish,' I replied. 'But it all boils down to this: are you still in love?'

Genia bent her head, leaving me uncertain. Then she said: 'Heaven be praised, yes.'

'Then everything's all right.'

'Shall we go down?' she suggested, rising to her feet. She was wearing a simple gown, white as the cloth that covered the table.

As we went down, I asked her: 'These people, are they your friends or your husband's?'

'We pooled them when we married, as one does with books . . . that one doesn't read any more.'

'What about new acquisitions?' I asked, pointedly.

'Oh . . . those . . .'

We came out into the dusk of the garden, where I was introduced to a few of the guests. They all asked Genia about her husband, but she parried their questions lightly and invited me to sit in one of the wickerwork armchairs. The fair-haired boy appeared from a side path.

Facing me sat an angular woman with her legs apart. 'Genia has told me a lot about you,' she suddenly said to me in a confidential tone. In the growing dusk she leaned forward, narrowing her eyes to see me better. Then she sank back into her chair.

'Genia is an extraordinary woman,' she went on. 'She has the vitality of a teen-ager and an exceptional zest for living. When she talks of something that happened in the past, one seems to feel her enjoying it with her whole body. I always remember the time she described her delight when she went bathing as a child. How do you think she looks, after so many years?'

'Very well.'

The Villa on the Hill

‘I’m glad. She seemed a little tired, to me; preoccupied. Perhaps she needs a change, something to distract her. But the pleasure of seeing an old friend again – young, too – will act like a tonic. Do you know her husband?’

‘No.’

‘You’ll meet him. But how late he is! Still, husbands are always late, aren’t they?’ She gave a harsh, brittle laugh and I closed my eyes in the gloom, resting my chin on my clasped hands. The raucous voice went on: ‘He’s an interesting man. Paul. Serious, perhaps too serious for Ginia. He’s just the opposite of her. Ginia has remained a child, outwardly. Paul lives even more intensely, perhaps, than she does, but he watches himself, never lets it show. Ginia, on the other hand, is transparent as crystal – a delightful crystal. But how silly of me! You know her better than I do!’

At that moment, someone in the house switched on the big lantern above us and in the sudden blaze of light I saw her thin, olive-skinned face and mocking eyes. The light was greeted with exclamations of approval and the conversation became general.

Another cheer heralded the arrival of Ginia’s husband. Wearing white flannels he emerged from the flight of steps arm in arm with Ginia and followed by the young man. He was tall, stern-faced, and he went round greeting all the guests with a faint smile, making no apology for his lateness. He shook my hand carelessly and begged us all to sit down. The young fellow had remained behind in the patch of shadow.

The husband went off with Ginia to dress for dinner. Another man got up and went into the house. Soon I found myself alone in the circle of chairs, but I could hear the boy breathing in the shadows.

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'Everyone seems to do just as he likes, here,' I remarked quietly in a friendly tone.

'Ginia will come back to call you,' he answered, coming forward into the light and standing uncertainly on the gravel. Now that his face was illuminated it no longer seemed so young and smooth. It bore a trace of suffering out of harmony with his eyes.

'Feeling depressed?' I asked.

'Excuse me . . .' he said softly. At that moment Ginia appeared at the door and came towards us.

When dinner was over, someone put out the light because of the swarm of mosquitoes, and we stayed sitting on the terrace among the dark tree-tops. A lady had caught cold, so Ginia and Ada went inside with her and for a while no-one spoke.

'The pavements were like a furnace, today,' said a deep voice from the far end of the table.

Two or three were smoking, and the tiny red points shone like glow-worms. I sipped my coffee as though I had not heard. At last another voice – from the vague outline of Ginia's husband – replied: 'The worst is over.'

Then a voice I knew well: 'Haven't you ever been up here before, really?'

'I know these roads,' I answered in the dark. 'I tramped all over them when I was your age. I didn't go down into the torrents, but I risked rolling into them several times. Then I lost sight of them.'

'Did you know Ginia then?'

'Let's get this straight. The hill was one thing, Ginia quite another. Still, I think she enjoyed our little suppers at the inn as much as the rest of us did.'

The Villa on the Hill

The husband suddenly remarked: 'To hear Ginia talk, you all ran wild like a pack of wolves.'

The maid came and spoke in his ear. The husband asked us to excuse him and followed her out, unconcernedly. There remained two elderly gentlemen and a young girl talking together at the bottom of the table, and my young friend, who walked restlessly up and down for a moment, then leaned on the railing.

My eyelids drooped and I hung my head. The time went by unnoticed. Then I heard the young man's voice again, very close to me this time, bitter and mocking. I stood up and took him by the arm. 'Shall we go and look for the others?' I suggested.

Instead, he led me over to the edge of the terrace. Far below us, in the valley, lay a great sweep of the shining city, quivering like a lake. For a little while we stood there, leaning on the railing. I said: 'Tell me the truth. You come up here every evening, don't you?'

'I'm fed up,' he said softly. 'Utterly sick of it all. Tell me! How did you manage to enjoy being young in a place like this?'

'You discover the answer to things like that when they're over. Just go ahead and don't think about it.' He made no reply. 'The hill doesn't suit you?' I continued. 'Try living down there . . .'

He still said nothing, and spat quietly on the gravel. Then he asked abruptly: 'What's it like in Sicily?'

'For a man like you, very good.'

'That stupid Ada!' he exclaimed under his breath. 'Did you notice how interested she is in you and Ginia?'

'All women are like that . . .'

At that moment, one of the two old gentlemen joined us and mentioned he was getting anxious about his wife. 'Let's go and look for her.'

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We met her at the door with Ginia's husband. 'I'm all right,' she said. 'But Ginia's been taken ill.'

'It's nothing, nothing at all,' said the husband. 'Just indigestion.'

Murmurs of concern broke out. The boy started forward in great agitation, but the husband seized his wrist and drew him back. 'Where d'you think you're going? They'll be back in a minute.'

We sat down again and several started talking. The lady explained in a weak voice that she'd been overcome by the sudden cold after the heat of the day. The husband said calmly: 'Pray don't mention it. No trouble at all.' The boy had not sat down: he was pacing restlessly to and fro.

'Shall we smoke?'

At last the door opened and Ada reappeared, gloomy and cynical. Beside her came Ginia. She was pale and seemed dazed.

I could have wished I was somewhere else. Luckily the darkness isolated me, as it did all the others sitting on the terrace. Even the white clothes of Ginia and her husband were no longer visible. Someone spoke, above the chirping of the crickets. Then Ada started talking.

Why had I come up here?

After a long, long time, one of the old men complained about the mosquitoes and we spoke of going inside. 'It's a pity to turn one's back on a view like this.'

But we all rose and began to file down the steps. I brought up the rear and Ginia came over to my side. The sound of shuffling feet almost drowned her voice as she said: 'Poor devil! Are you bored?'

'Not particularly. Is this how things always are?'

The Villa on the Hill

'More or less.' Suddenly she squeezed my arm and whispered in my ear: 'Talk with that boy. Don't leave him alone even for a moment.'

Below, the elderly men and Signor Paul were sitting in the room, while the ladies were strolling round the garden. I paused a moment by the radio – they were all fumbling with it – then turned back. Just as I was about to set foot on a gravel path I bumped into Ada coming in from the darkness. I noticed her firm step. 'Where is Ginia?' I asked.

'Consoling herself with youth,' she replied sharply. 'Have you seen what's going on?'

'What?'

'You must know!'

'What?'

'Things one mustn't talk about. But there! That's why people marry.' Her voice was derisive, more bitter than ever. 'Up you go! Give her your congratulations! She's waiting for you. Tell her she looks like a little girl again!'

I went inside. I had no wish to seek out anyone and I sat down, gazing into the black trees.

Then, out of the darkness, came Ginia and the boy, arm in arm. They stopped suddenly and Ginia gave me a smile. They sat down in the garden chairs and I joined them. The music of the radio came softly from the room, without disturbing the silence of the night. The blonde young girl came running out and stopped short on the gravel, seeing us sitting there in a circle.

I did not look at Ginia. I did not want to see her pleading glance. I rested my chin on my hands. 'Are you still counting on making that trip?' I was speaking to the boy, but it was Ginia who replied: 'It's so dull here, some days, that it really does make one want to jump on a train.'

'Just an illusion – like any other.'

The boy burst out: 'He's quite right, you know. In

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certain circumstances it's even a cowardly thing to do. People talk about drunkards, but anyone who won't shoulder a liability is just as bad.'

'Spending the summer on the hill doesn't seem to me much of a liability,' said Ginia with a smile.

'May I join you?' the young girl broke in as she sat down. 'How are you feeling, Signora?'

In the silence that followed, we listened to the faint sound of the radio until it died away. A light breeze had sprung up.

'Will you have a drink?' Ginia asked, rising to her feet. When she came back with the tray we were still sitting in silence. The blonde girl looked at us uneasily. Ginia began to pour out our drinks. 'Taking us by and large, we're all fond of a drink,' she quipped.

The blonde laughed aloud. The boy started to his feet. 'I want to talk to your husband, Ginia,' he said gently.

Coolly, Ginia put down her glass and stared at him. For some seconds they looked each other full in the face. 'Come on then,' she said dryly. 'We'll both talk to him. Let's go.'

The boy turned red and smiled scornfully. Then he moved to Ginia's side, but when they reached the doorway he squeezed her arm and left her, rushing off between the flowerbeds into the darkness.

Ginia was weeping. Her face was all red and crumpled like a baby's. I had never seen her weep. I let go her arm and made her sit down facing me, closing the door. When the silence became unbearable, it was Ginia who raised her great eyes to mine. 'As you see, I'm growing old,' she said with a smile. 'Where can that boy have gone?' I

The Villa on the Hill

looked at her without replying, and she went on: 'He's so naive. Not even capable of standing up for himself.'

'Should he have?'

'It seems so. Usually these single-minded people are keener on their rights than the rest of us are. They're capable of anything. But they don't know how to get to the root of a problem.'

'Do you wish he had done that?'

'It was better perhaps'

'Does he know . . . about you?'

She nodded gravely.

'Is that what upset him?'

Ginia leaned forward, her chin on her hand. 'I think I was his first love,' her lips twisted as she spoke, 'and there's nothing more dangerous.'

Her reddened nostrils quivered strongly. She still looked bravely at me and her eyes were clear again, but she lowered them. Then she came to her feet and walked to and fro. 'Did you expect to be a father, when you were twenty?'

The door opened, and accompanied by a burst of music Ginia's husband came in. He closed it behind him, and in silence came over towards us. To Ginia he said: 'I was anxious. How are you?'

She pouted jokingly: 'We've been having a good cry together.'

He took her hand, turned it over and pressed the palm to his lips. They both stood side by side, looking at me, and the husband said: 'You must excuse me, but I'm uneasy about her.'

'Babies must be taken seriously,' Ginia said.

'Exactly.'

Amid congratulations we re-entered the drawing-room. I felt a need to be alone and I tried to catch Ginia's eye to get her permission. Ginia shrugged her shoulders, then had

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to answer something Ada had said, so I went out on to the steps. I saw the young girl's blonde head; she was still sitting where we had left her, staring at an empty chair, deep in thought. I turned away and wandered into the darkness.

I was vaguely hoping to meet the young fellow, and pushed on as far as a little glade under a lime tree. Beyond rose the shoulder of the hill, high and black. The crickets were shrill, but no human sound reached me except, faintly, a voice on the radio.

I tried to accustom myself to the idea that the youth had fled. The cool night, the fragrance of the trees, a vision of Ginia, brought me no peace. No longer did they blend to form an intimate memory. Instead, they gnawed at my very heart, unsettling, bewildering, like things in which I had no part. I was thinking, too, that in this glade, in front of that hill, Ginia and my young friend must have strolled together many a time.

I found him again, sitting where the girl had been, with his back to the light. He was alone and seemed to be absorbed in listening to Ada's voice coming from the room. As I paused I caught a few words. Ada was joking loudly. I sat facing the light and the boy saw me, but did not speak. I looked at him calmly, saying nothing.

For a moment I thought back to our meeting by the low wall, when he had smiled at me unexpectedly as he stubbed out his cigarette. But he was not smoking or smiling this time. 'You're seeking solitude, too?' he asked.

I did not answer, just looked at him. '... Not only away from everybody, but really alone, you understand? Away from jostling feet and curious eyes. You can tell Ginia that. I shall stay alone. Reassure her.' His voice sounded hoarse, but it did not ring true.

'Why did you come back to tell me that?' I asked.

The Villa on the Hill

He was silent for a moment, then he said: 'You can't understand. I wanted to say it to Ginia, but that won't do. You're her friend, you tell her! I must get away...' He was standing, now.

'I shan't tell her anything,' I said.

'Why not?'

'Because it seems to me you're exaggerating.'

Those scornful eyes of his were fixed on my face, but he was trembling.

'Go to Ginia,' I went on calmly, 'treat her as an equal and tell her what you have in mind. You'll see that Ginia is a sensible woman, and you'll manage to get out of it. All the rest does not count.'

'The rest is what does count,' the youth faltered. 'Ginia won't turn back. She's not a fool. Even I, who am talking to you, don't know the truth.'

My eyes wandered to the tracery thrown on the gravel by the shadows of the wistaria. My temples were throbbing painfully.

'I'm going away,' said the boy, 'without saying goodbye to anyone. That way, I shan't come back. I implore you to talk to Ginia...' His light footsteps died away on the gravel.

When I went back inside, I found the guests preparing to depart. While the ladies went upstairs to get ready, Ginia's husband invited me to come back some afternoon. Ginia would be alone then, because of the heat, and would gladly have a chat with me about old times. I presented the young fellow's apologies for his informal departure, but he laughed and said: 'He often disappears like that to wander about by himself, and at his age, who can blame him?'

As we trooped through the garden towards the gate, Ginia shook my hand and whispered: 'Come back soon. Don't leave me all alone.' Her husband was walking on

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ahead, between the blonde and the old lady. At the gate, Ada shook hands with him firmly, threw her arms around Ginia and kissed her.

We fell into two groups. In front, the lady and the two elderly gentlemen; behind them, I walked between Ada and the young blonde girl. The dark outline of the trees was lost in the gloom. The deep awareness of earth and night reigned alone, under the stars. I walked unheeding, barely replying to the conversation, longing for the moment when I should be alone again.

The Cornfield

As long as the season was still young, no one paid any attention to those tender green shoots, though they were taller than usual, but as the hours of twilight lengthened and people strolled along the roads to enjoy the cool evening air, everyone noticed the growing corn. It would have grown still higher, yellow and rustling, with a poppy or two here and there, and one fine day the old man would have wanted to reap it, make it into sheaves and talk about it in the streets and the shops. Perhaps he would have tried to sell it.

Amalia noticed a group of lads crowding round the seat by the roadside, just where the factory wall ended and the strip of field began, in front of the house. She watched them anxiously. In a way she was ashamed of the corn, yet when it was green, as it was now, it gave her a surge of hope for something she could not have explained. But the lads only looked at it for a while, then went away.

One evening, while the factory workers who lived in the last houses before the boundary were cycling past, Amalia came home carrying her hat, holding her head high so as not to see the green stalks. She ate hastily, not noticing the broken crockery or the dirty litter strewn around the kitchen. She ate what there was; to her it was unimportant;

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so were her mother's worn-out shoes and the old man's unbuttoned trousers or the way he wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. Her only concern was to be quick so that she could get away and not have to listen to the old man going on again about his corn and grumbling that the manure had not fertilized it properly.

Still hatless, she went out into the dusk, hurrying away from the house because she did not want Tosca to call for her there. Humming to herself, she made her way to the end of the road where the trees began again, and looked up to see if there was a light in Tosca's apartment. The avenue was full of children, playing and shrieking as long as there was a scrap of daylight left. Amalia stopped by the mirror at the American Bar to put on fresh lipstick and rearrange her fringe of hair. In the greenish reflection her eyes looked deep-set and cruel.

Tosca had once told her she envied their isolated hovel. All Tosca had in mind was the convenience of not having to do the stairs. For Tosca, Sunday was a grand day, especially when she could go and picnic in the fields. Her idea of bliss was to spend the whole day picking grapes.

Someone stared at her. It was Tosca's brother, Tonino. Amalia had once told him plainly she disliked him. She could not stand his ugly, pasty face and spiteful eyes or his great dangling hands with their bitten nails. This time he smiled and muttered something complimentary without moving out of her way.

'Shall I go first, or will you?' she asked, infusing a little sweetness into her answering smile.

'If you put it like that, I'll follow you,' Tonino replied, holding out his hand.

'I'm waiting for Tosca.'

'I'm not,' he shrugged. Amalia stamped her foot impatiently, but Tonino laughed at her, looking pleased with

The Cornfield

himself. Fuming, Amalia turned her back on him and sauntered away.

When she had left him behind she wandered up the avenue alone under the shade of the trees. Everywhere the stink of frying was blending with the dusty smell of the street, but through it all she could feel the cool evening breeze and it pleased her. The clatter of a tram in the distance pleased her, too.

Later in the evening, Amalia inspected the panels of photographs under the red lights outside the cinema and made a face. Tosca was not keen on going in, either, so they strolled around and eventually paused in front of the pleasure gardens called the *Giardino*.

'I'll see if there's anyone inside that we know,' Tosca said. A hand waved at them from a little group sitting just inside the fence. 'Come on!' Tosca cried. 'There's Gianni.'

'We haven't even got hats on,' Amalia protested.

'What odds? Some girls take them off, anyway. Come on!'

Gianni was there, so was Tonino, so were all the young factory workers in the district, drinking beer instead of dancing. There were only a few couples on the dance floor – a square of asphalt between the trees – but the band played all the louder. It was cool under the trees.

Amalia refused beer and asked for coffee. She was furious because she had on the old shoes she wore to work, and when there are only a few couples dancing, people notice a girl's legs. She saw one girl in a white dress without stockings, as if it were summer already. She could see one couple at a table in the shadows. The man had a moustache and looked a sporting type. Perhaps he was the owner of the car outside. The girl was clinging to his arm and talking to him; a typist, probably, judging from her painted fingernails.

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Tonino asked her, in his sarcastic voice, if she would like to dance.

'Not now. I'm tired,' she replied.

Tosca and Gianni were already on the dance floor. The other fellows – mechanics and apprentices, apparently – had stopped talking and were sniggering between themselves. Obviously she and Tosca had interrupted their conversation. Amalia looked at them, her face expressionless. Tonino said: 'You needn't stop what you were saying. The young lady isn't from Turin.'

A cross-eyed idiot whom Amalia did not know asked: 'Really? Where from, then?'

Another fellow remarked, shaking his head: 'A woman's a woman, wherever she comes from.' But that cross-eyed fool kept on at her until Tonino said solemnly, in an affected voice: 'We're agricultural workers, we are. Fed up with planting cabbages, so we've emigrated. Now where would our little village be, I wonder?'

Amalia pretended not to hear, but she knew he was getting at her and she felt herself sweating. For a moment her heart was louder than the band. Tonino went on: 'We're a proud lot, in our village. Won't have anything to do with people who don't work in the fields with us . . .'

A tall curly-haired fellow came towards them, his jacket over his arm. One of the group waved and called to him. He wore a white pullover and his sunburned arms were bare. The cross-eyed chap smiled, addressing him as Remo.

Amalia sat there, looking down, while they exchanged greetings and a joke or two. Then she heard this Remo say to the others: 'Is she free?'

The orchestra started up again and Amalia jumped to her feet, throwing him a smile. They strode towards the asphalt dance floor.

The Cornfield

Before putting his arm around her he squeezed her hand, then gripped her closely by the waist, his right hand exploring the firmness of her spine. Amalia relaxed against him, and was surprised when a little later he asked her in a low voice where she came from. She gave him an astonished smile and they said no more. When the dance was over they looked at each other for a moment. Then she said: 'You'd better put your jacket on again. It's cold.'

They walked past the couples who were still standing there, made their way to the gate and went out into the shadows of the avenue. Her companion had flung his jacket over his shoulders, his long, unhurried strides keeping him abreast of her. He did not speak, leaving the problem of conversation to her. For a moment or two, Amalia forgot he was with her, then she took herself in hand and remarked: 'I've had enough of those four ignorant fools.'

The other looked at her, then murmured: 'They're fools, all right. Don't understand a thing. What's your name?' and he took her arm.

Once again Amalia felt the same amorous squeeze as before, and gently moved his hand away. 'Let's just go on walking,' she said softly, but by the time they had reached the metalled road between the houses and the dark fields, Amalia was clinging to his elbow, listening to him telling her about last year's great race, when he and the other leading cyclists had passed the boundary line at that very spot. Amalia vaguely remembered a Sunday of shouting and uproar, and a whole flood of cyclists hunched over their handle-bars, all quite unrecognisable. Amalia had never heard the winner's name, but her companion was certainly a good dancer. She liked the way he had not boasted, saying he was riding as one of a team. 'And what are you doing now?' she asked.

He was training for a race on the Riviera. Amalia's heart

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began to beat faster, for this meant he was an important contestant. 'The Riviera? Really?' she said.

Remo never smiled. Even in the darkness Amalia had noticed that he did not smile, not even when he stroked her thigh and told her she was a pretty girl. 'All over the Riviera?' she enquired.

Remo told her that races were won in training, and that roads were all the same. Amalia felt a longing to see him with his thighs bare. They must be very strong and well developed. She asked if he had any photographs.

Still grasping her arm, Remo suggested: 'Shall we go into the field?' They sat down in the grass, and Amalia asked when he would be going to the Riviera? Had he been there before? Remo murmured something as he ran his hand up her leg, slipped the other arm round her neck and held her close against him, kissing her. Amalia started to her feet. Remo, still squatting on the grass, looked up at her. 'But . . .' Amalia stammered, 'we hardly know each other.'

Remo stretched out his arm to seize her by the ankle, but Amalia jumped back, clearing the ditch by the bank. Far away, under the street lamp, she saw a man cycling past. Remo, still sitting in the field, cried: 'Come here, you fool! It's night-time, isn't it?'

'No! No!' Amalia cried, her heart in her mouth. 'We're not dogs.'

Cursing, Remo jumped up. Amalia ran lightly and managed to reach the street lamp. Remo followed her with great strides, but Amalia had slowed to a walk and turned aside along the pavement.

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Amalia slept on a sofa in the kitchen. Her mirror and little boxes were on the chest-of-drawers in the other room where her father and mother slept. She went home only to eat and sleep. Now that the corn in front of the door was growing taller, she didn't stay at home even on Sunday mornings. The walls of the two-roomed hovel were peeling, but solidly built. The place looked like an old tavern. Amalia heartily wished the factory owners would take over the hut and the bit of land and level the lot. But her father seemed to feel secure enough, since he had sown the field.

At night, any noise outside could be heard through the door; the voices of occasional passers-by, a dog barking in the distance, the trains. With the dawn came the creaking of carts. Sometimes, but not often, the hum and swirl of a car.

This was the hut that Tosca considered more convenient than her third-floor apartment. Tosca wasn't one to go and sit in a field with a cyclist. She wouldn't even have gone there with Gianni. She was born in the town. But she would have made love in a cinema, or on a Sunday out in the country.

Amalia had done it herself in the vineyard when she was a child, but wouldn't sink to that any longer. What was the point of getting a job in the town and living her own life, if she was going to have a roll in the fields like some country wench? Anyway, love-making wasn't all that much fun, and to do it like that was disgusting. Knowing when to give way was what made her different from girls like Tosca, who would lie with any workman for the sake of a ticket to a show or a day out.

'All men are equal,' Amalia thought to herself, 'but one man isn't the same as another. That cyclist was rather nice, even if he did go off swearing in the end.' She'd have liked to ask Tosca about him. Tosca could have asked Tonino, who would have asked the others. But she was afraid they'd

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gossip and laugh at her. One evening she was just about to go into the *Giardino* when she saw a crowd of young fellows inside with Tonino in the middle of them, so she stayed outside, craning her neck, looking among the trees in the hope of seeing the curly-headed cyclist. There he was, wearing a polo-necked sweater, arguing with somebody and red in the face.

The very next day – it was a cold, cloudy morning – Amalia was washing herself in the dark corner of the kitchen when she glanced through the window and saw a tall man with bare legs, wearing a sweater and a white beret, leaning on a bicycle, his chin raised as he surveyed the place. It was Remo.

When Amalia went out, she kept her head down, adjusting her hat. Four steps took her along the path through the corn and into the road. She walked on without looking round, and suddenly Remo was there beside her, his bicycle clicking as he wheeled it along with one hand. He had the tanned thighs of an athlete, softened by a light covering of fair hair. Amalia was silently cursing herself for having let him pick her up at home.

‘Going to work?’ Remo asked quietly as they walked along.

Amalia eyed him crossly, not knowing what to say. Suddenly she snapped: ‘Are you doing your training?’ Then she stopped walking. At a corner in the distance, a crowd of girls and workmen waited in front of the entrance to a factory. On the chill air rose the blast of the works siren, long, discordant, imperious. ‘Who told you where I live?’ she asked.

‘No one. I go along that way every morning,’ he said, ‘with my little bike. You’re working today?’

‘I’m in a hurry.’

‘I’ll call for you tonight.’

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‘Tonight I’m going to the theatre.’

Remo did not seem surprised. ‘By yourself?’ he asked.
‘Then I’ll come, too.’

‘Don’t call for me,’ Amalia said. ‘I’ll be outside the *Giardino*.’

That evening they went to the cinema instead – the one at the town centre, because Amalia told him she was sick of seeing the same old faces round her. Remo put on his jacket before they climbed on the tram. They stayed quiet in the cinema, because she stopped him and said teasingly that there was a time for everything. The film, viewed from a comfortable red arm-chair, interested her so much that if he had started anything she would have been really annoyed.

On their way back they stopped at a café, and Amalia got him to talk about the race on the Riviera. He told her about the sea, the bathers, the palm-trees. She asked if he had ever been abroad before, wanted to hear all about his past and his plans if he won the race.

Remo talked readily enough about his bicycle and his races, but had very little to say about anything else. Every now and then he tried to let his hand stray and Amalia had to slap his fingers, blushing at the vivacity of the gesture.

She would not allow him to escort her as far as the cornfield. She shook hands when she left him and Remo stayed in the middle of the road, tall and a trifle round-shouldered, watching her go into the distance.

Now the dog-days had come with their scorching heat, and the old man was fussing round the field all the time. When Amalia came home from work she nearly always found him there in front of the house, testing the weight of the ears with his hand, grubbing up weeds, then straightening up, his face radiant in the shade of his tattered old straw

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hat, looking as if he had changed into one of his own corn-stalks. He would stop passers-by for a chat. Luckily, his traditional reserve kept him from telling the whole town his piffling little hopes and plans.

But he discussed them eagerly with her mother, making all sorts of calculations. He already saw himself as the owner of that couple of handfuls of land. Amalia would have given up her bottle of Cologne, if only the men who owned the factory next door would have turned them out of the cottage. Instead, her father kept on working harder than ever, going round the place several times at night and sometimes staying out until morning, so that the owners should see him there with his little lamp on his belt when they came to pick up the keys.

How was it possible that his earthy, sour-smelling body, raised between the furrow and the cowshed, could be the same flesh as her own? Amalia shuddered, thinking how he and her mother had come together—her down-at-heel mother, he with his bearded, cigarette-stained mouth on her mother's bloodless body—to bring her into the world. When Amalia washed herself, shut up in the kitchen, standing in the wash-tub, she felt she was scouring off the taint of the land and the vineyard.

Looking through the window one morning she saw her father and Remo talking together, Remo standing by his bicycle. She quarrelled violently with Remo about it and that night she did not go to meet him as arranged. Instead, the moment she had finished her supper, she ran over to Tosca's place, so that he wouldn't catch her at home if he came to the hut.

She found Tosca eating salad. Tonino was shaving. She sat down at the table facing Tosca. Tonino said he could see her in the mirror.

'You're lucky, you two,' Amalia said, 'to be by your-

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selves like this. All you earn is your own, and if you don't like the place you can move.'

'Why don't you make a third?' Tonino asked. 'I'd stay here.'

Tosca went on eating, looking keenly at Amalia. 'Oh, you!' she said to Tonino. 'Everybody gets fed up with their life,' she went on. 'I wish I'd been born in the country like you, Amalia. At least you're not shut in all day and if you're tired you can always lie down in the shade.'

Tonino started singing: 'Back to your village . . .'

Amalia smiled as she looked at the salad. 'It's not all that easy: there's more work to do than there is here and nobody gives you a word of thanks. The pigs have a fine time, but not the one who looks after them. It's worse than being a servant.'

'At least you get cyclists there,' Tonino cried, half turning round, his mouth twisted under his up-turned hand.

Remo made it up with Amalia, letting her see he understood that she didn't want him coming to the house. Instead, he waited for her outside the *Giardino*. Amalia smiled as she saw him coming towards her to seize her eagerly by the wrist. Still, it hurt her a little to meet his penitent eyes as he looked down at her. Joking with Tosca at the factory, one day, she told her: 'If only he'd say a word or two!'

Remo quickly understood, too, that when they were together she didn't want to see around them faces from her own neighbourhood, so one Sunday he took her to a fashionable swimming pool where there was a string of cars outside.

They sat on the cool mosaic with their feet in the green-tinted water and smoked a cigarette. Amalia watched the bathers, envying the slim lines of their flanks, their supple

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spines. In her own tight costume she thought she looked plump but well built. She knew that sunbathing enhanced the attractive contrast between her skin and her hair, and a headscarf could do a lot for her. She noticed that few of the men were as well developed as Remo, and for the first time she felt a thrill in her blood as she looked at him.

Lying at full length on the sand with her eyes half shut, she thought the sun seemed more glorious, more marvelous, than on other days. Could this be the same sun that used to scorch her calves and the back of her neck as a child in the fields? Remo, stretched beside her, asked in a whisper if they could have supper together that evening. Amalia nodded without speaking.

They ended up in a room where they were served by waiters in white jackets. Amalia felt stiff after her day in the open air, and jokingly asked Remo if his training would have suffered. For the first time he laughed, revealing his teeth. 'Training gives one more strength, not less,' he told her. That day he was wearing a sports shirt and a fancy handkerchief.

'I'm a poor country girl,' Amalia babbled as she drank her iced white wine. 'You've seen where I live, haven't you? My father planted corn all round the house, as if it were a shed. If you really love me you ought to set fire to the place. At the very least, burn the corn, root it out, so that I never set eyes on it again . . .'

She was laughing as Remo carried her bodily up the stairs of his home to an attic under the roof. He had the key of it, and kept her there till three in the morning.

In the days that followed, Amalia grew to hate that attic, the canvas camp-bed and the slanting beam that hit her head unless she was very careful. In spite of their new

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intimacy, Remo was no more talkative than before.

He answered crossly when Amalia remarked how nice it would be to go to the Riviera together and have a fine room and stroll on the beach. It worried her to think he was exhausting his body too much just before the race, but she knew she must bind him to her, increase his passion for her, and anyway it wouldn't have done any good to refuse him now. Instead, she must make him so used to having her that he couldn't do without her. The more so because now she, too, spent the nights in a sweat of desire. She found peace only in those thrilling moments when Remo was taking her to the attic.

One Sunday she went to Fontana Fredda on the back of a motorbike, clinging tightly to his back. There was a meeting of competitors from the whole area. Once she grew accustomed to the trick of balancing, Amalia glanced sideways at the fields flying past them. Looking at them like that made her feel happy. On their way back at sunset, facing the golden brilliance, she pressed her cheek against Remo's solid, leather-covered back, almost closing her eyes to shut out the dazzle from the roadside trees.

At Fontana Fredda, Remo talked with a man in a white suit who spoke to him like an old friend and slapped him on the shoulder. He was a Federation Technician. The following morning, Remo intensified his training and decided with Amalia that they would stop indulging in irregularities. In the evening they met for a beer or went to the cinema. Again Amalia asked if she couldn't go to the Riviera with him on the Sunday of the race, but Remo said no.

Gradually she saw him less and less – just for a moment before supper – because immediately afterwards Remo went to bed, so as to be up at dawn. His mind was full of the race and he said less than ever.

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Meanwhile, the grain was swelling and turning yellow. Sparse as it was, it still waved waist-high in front of the house and the old man never left it except at night. Already, many boys had had their ears boxed for throwing stones among the corn. When Amalia went out in the morning she was ashamed to be seen.

One night when she was coming out of the cinema, all alone, she had a sudden longing to go along the road where they used to meet, so she made her way to the *Giardino*. She heard the orchestra when she was still some distance away; only as she drew nearer could she enjoy the cool shade of those trees. She halted behind the fence and looked at the crowded dance floor and the little tables; she saw the workmen sitting there. One was just coming back with Tosca, after a dance. She saw Tonino, laughing, and she saw Remo. Remo who had gone to bed three hours ago.

She felt her heart contract, and she fought down the urge to go in. After all, he wasn't even dancing. Why had he lied? He had no need to, he spoke so little. Perhaps he had felt thirsty and come down for a chat with his friends. But once the day of the race was over, she would never leave him. He meant too much to her.

If she hadn't dreaded being seen by Tonino and the others, she might still have gone in, but instead she walked on in a fury and reached home without even glancing at the rustling corn. If only that day of the race would come quickly and be over!

In the dead of night she was awakened by footsteps outside the door and the sound of heavy breathing. A dog, perhaps? Or a drunk? Terror and uncertainty kept her trembling on the sofa, her eyes starting open as she heard a coming and going, a creaking. Could it be the wind? Her heart felt numb with horror and shame at having to sleep in a low kitchen like a peasant girl, behind a door by the

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road, at the mercy of every passer-by; at having to keep the window bolted, even in June, for fear someone might climb in; at being alone, and knowing that Remo, too, had played her false. She was terrified in case the door was not properly shut; even worse was her dread of anyone seeing the sink in the corner with its constant dripping. She screwed up her eyes and tried to sleep.

It had not been a windy night, that much was certain. The sun was not yet up, but already the heat was oppressive. Amalia, drying herself in front of the window, saw the strip of corn all battered down and ruined. She could see the seat by the roadside, now; only yesterday it had been hidden by the yellow-green stalks.

Amalia was at the door when she heard her mother's scream at the window. They both jumped among the furrows – Amalia already had her hat on – and saw how the stalks were broken, crushed and strewn over the bare earth. A few ears were shedding their grains. A workman cycling past turned to look.

The old woman, still barefoot, was clutching her cheek with her hand, holding her elbow. 'This time your father'll murder us,' she said hoarsely.

Amalia shrugged her shoulders. She bent down and ran her hand once again through the stalks lying on the whitish soil. 'What d'you expect him to say? It must have been a drunk. Doesn't he ever get drunk himself?'

She went off, feeling sorry to leave her mother groaning there alone. She walked quickly, because groups of workmen were now hurrying past on their bicycles. Suddenly she remembered what she had said to Remo when she was drunk.

She went home again at mid-day, not letting Tosca come

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with her. From a distance the hovel looked the same. Her heart began beating painfully when she saw the devastated strip. The door looked almost naked. 'Where's papa?' she cried.

The old woman was blowing the fire and looking inside the oven. 'He's gone to give notice to the factory owners. He says they did it themselves, so as to take the land away from him. He wants to go back to the village and die of hunger. Are you sure you didn't hear anything last night?'

'All this fuss for a couple of sheaves of corn, if that much. The seed cost more.'

'Go and tell that to him. You've been to work this morning?'

'He's coming back?'

'He's been back twice already. He doesn't know where to go, any more. How could you possibly not have heard something?'

When her father came back, Amalia dodged the blows, keeping her hat on and putting her gloves on the table. The old man's face was scarlet when he came in, but little by little it grew pale, limp and frightened. He went outside to rake around and came back with great tears welling from his eyes. He spilled his soup on the table. The old woman said nothing.

'Going to the factory today?' he asked suddenly. Amalia lowered her eyes to her plate. 'Work!' he went on. 'Work for those beasts! Run and join the queue! Work to fatten them! They need people like you! They make you work all day and they pay you at night. Old woman, where have you put the hoe?'

Amalia got away half-way through the meal, to stop herself from screaming. She wandered round the deserted streets in the hot sun, biting her lips and looking up whenever a tram went by the end of the road. Suddenly a cyclist

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shot past her, bare-legged and covered with dust. It was not Remo.

At the factory entrance, Amalia asked Tosca if she could spend the evening with her. They went shopping to buy a loaf, then they climbed the filthy stairs together and sat down in the kitchen to recover their breath. Tosca started on her housework. Tonino came home and greeted her with a meaningful nod. Amalia gave him an absent-minded smile.

While Tosca prepared the salad on the balcony, Amalia got up and began undoing a box of eggs. Tonino, who was washing himself behind a partition, said lightly: 'Aren't you even going to thank me?' His eyes and untidy hair appeared above the wooden rail. 'Don't you know I've done you a favour?'

Amalia raised her eyes. 'And if you want any grape-picking done this year, I'll be there,' Tonino concluded, coming into the kitchen rubbing his shoulder. He looked at her with a smile and his eyes grew sharp. 'They told me you wanted to see that corn cut before you could go cycling. Aren't you going to thank me?'

Amalia, leaning on the table, couldn't take it in all at once. Then her cheeks flamed and her breath died in her throat. She leapt to the door, opened it and rushed downstairs. As she walked she hid her face, twisted with weeping, so as not to be recognised, and the shrill cries of the children reached her as from a remote distance, dulled to a faint buzzing. When she reached home she let the old man go on nagging her for a little while. Even after it was dark, he was still persisting that he couldn't make out why she hadn't heard anything from the kitchen.